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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY, 1962 Vol. 10, No. 3

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CORPSE IN

The department store seemed to have almost as many murder suspects as customers. So Shayne had no choice —but to concentrate on the corpse.

THE NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

by Brett Halliday

MICHAEL SHAYNE strode into the anteroom of his Flagler Street office just as the phone began to ring. Lucy Hamilton finished the sentence she was typing, then swivelled neatly toward the receiver. She picked it up, listened. "For you, Michael."

The redheaded detective shoved his hip against his secretary's desk. "Who is it, angel?"

"Paul Magnusson. President, Miami Dry Goods."

The detective's angular face creased into a grin. He picked up the phone. "Shayne speaking."

"I realize that you're a busy man," Magnusson said. "I'm sorry to impose."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Magnusson?"

"It's hard to discuss it over the phone. It's a confidential matter. Could you make it to the store?"

"I'm tied up till afternoon," the redhead said. "How about four p.m., Mr. Magnusson?"

"Well . . . all right. Our exec-

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THE SHOWCASE

utive offices are on the fourth floor."

"I'll see you at four," Shayne said, and hung up.

Lucy Hamilton crossed her pretty legs and looked up expectantly. "I hope that you'll get your expenses for this job, Michael."

"I always do, angel!"

Her brown eyes smiled. "I used to know a few sales girls in the Miami Dry Goods. They're woefully underpaid, Michael. Apparently the store is terribly tight with money."

"Their overhead is too high," Shayne said. "A fancy building."

Lucy Hamilton turned back to her typewriter. "That's all they have—a chic store with loads of fancy fixtures and glass and flagstones. They never seem to carry the right merchandize, Michael, and they certainly give lousy service. Every time I go in, I come out angry. I just can't seem to get waited on. Magnusson must be cutting corners. He doesn't hire enough people."

Lucy was right, Shayne decided, entering the thick glass doors shortly before 4 p.m. It was Saturday, and under the shell-shaped roof, a single sales girl was besieged by a swarm of housewives. Five hundred recessed flood lights brightened the modernistic main building where signs proclaimed an 'End of the Month' clearance sale. Here, too, the customers outnumbered the clerks six to one, with now and then, a red-eyed buyer or an overworked assistant scurrying to the public's help.

Shayne took the smoothly rolling escalator to the second floor, long-footed it up the rolling steps to the third and fourth. He picked his way through the expensive Danish furniture toward the executive offices, which were flanked by the busy credit and accounting departments.

The redhead found Magnusson's secretary at the end of a teakwood-panelled hall. "We've been expecting you, Mr. Shayne," she said. "This way."

Magnusson was a pint-sized, sharp-faced man in his late fifties, with a shock of white hair. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Shayne. Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes, thanks. Brandy, please."

Magnusson stepped across the thick carpet to a wall cabinet with revolving shelves. He removed a bottle of cognac and a snifter. "You take water?"

"With ice," Shayne said.

Shortly, the two men were sitting behind the large kidney-shaped conference table. Magnusson opened a file which contained the photo of a bony young man with dark, penetrating eyes. The lack of a smile and the hard, thin, compressed lips gave the man an air of tension.

Magnusson looked toward the door, making sure that it was shut. He handed Shayne the photo.

"This is Orville Fox—one of my merchandizing managers," the store president explained. "He's in charge of ten buyers, six assistants, and dozens of sales clerks. Fox is very valuable to us. He produces some ten million dollars worth of business a year."

Shayne grunted approvingly. "Go on," he said.

"To be quite candid—and don't ever let Fox know this—much of our operation depends on him and the other three merchandizing managers. Although he's the youngest and newest, Fox is the best among them. He's dynamic. He's hard. And he's profit-conscious. Unless he's murdered, he has a bright future at the Miami Dry Goods. Eventually, he will get my job."

Shayne pulled at his left earlobe. "Did you mention murder?"

"Someone wants to kill Fox."

"How do you know?"

The store president's small hands reached for a yellow house envelope—the narrow kind which is routed from department to department. The last entry was marked *"Fox,"* Shayne noticed.

Magnusson took a white slip out of the envelope. "Read this, please."

The redhead bent over the slip. THE PRESSURE COOKER EXPLODES SOON, it said. WATCH OUT! I'LL KILL YOU!

The message was in capitals, and the writer had seemingly used a ballpoint pen. When Shayne held the slip against the light, he noticed that the pen had bitten deeply into the paper. There was so much pressure that whoever had written this note had obviously been angry.

Magnusson pushed a white lock from his forehead. "The writer could very well be a crackpot."

"I doubt it," Shayne said, pointing out the pen's indentation. "Besides, the message has a carefully calculated ring to it. It doesn't suggest a crackpot, somehow."

"That's why we want you to take on this case, Mr. Shayne."

The redhead shook his head. "This is a matter for the police."

"I wish I could agree with you. If the police get hold of the case, our publicity goose would be cooked. Department stores depend on public relations, Mr. Shayne—especially the Miami Dry Goods. We're modern, progressive, with a conservative board of directors and many wealthy stockholders. We have to guard this store image. We could never afford a murder. In fact, we can't even afford to let this threat become known to our employees, or in the community. A scandal would cost us many thousands of dollars."

"How about your store detective?" Shayne asked. "He knows the personalities involved."

"Tom Weeks is good at catching shoplifters. But when a man's life and millions of dollars depend

on an investigation, I'd prefer you."

"My fee may be quite substantial," Shayne said. "It has the look of a complicated case."

"We'll pay whatever sum you may decide on." The white-haired president got out of the sleek chair, then pushed himself away from the kidney-shaped formica table. Standing, he extracted a check from the file.

"I've written you a check. Consider it an advance, Mr. Shayne."

The redhead pocketed the voucher. "I'll do my best. But I can't promise any wonders. We have very little to go on."

"Just keep the case out of the press!"

"I'll try." Shayne rose to his long feet, dwarfing the president. "But if something should happen to Fox, I won't be able to keep Police Chief Gentry out of here. I'd even be duty-bound not to try."

"I understand," Magnusson said, nodding. "You must handle it in your own way, of course."

Shayne took the house envelope and Fox's photo, which he tucked into the inside pocket of his sports jacket. "I'd like to meet your merchandizing manager. Will you call him?"

"Glad to," Magnusson pushed a buzzer, and asked his secretary to page Fox. "Incidentally, he's my son-in-law," he added, with a slight frown.

Orville Fox came into the room a few moments later, a young, bony bundle of energy two heads taller than the dignified store president. Fox wore a dark-blue mohair suit with narrow lapels, very tight in the shoulders, and a grey tie.

Magnusson made the introductions, and Shayne took the young executive's cold, bony-knuckled hand. Magnusson brought the redhead another drink. He failed to offer one to his son-in-law.

"I've expected this threat all along," Fox said. "You can't make money and be popular at the same time. On your way up, you can't avoid stepping on many toes. And you've got to crack the whip if you want to get any work out of the people. They call me a slave driver."

"It's an easy charge to make," Shayne said.

Fox adjusted the initialed handkerchief in his breast pocket. He darted Shayne a slightly sardonic look out of his black, penetrating eyes. "I want to be frank," he said. "I want to help you, Shayne. That's why I don't wish to deny anything. Yes, I'm rough on our employees. I've built a fire under my buyers. I demand ten-hour days from my assistants. I won't allow a sales person to stand still."

Shayne ran his fingers through his coarse red hair. "Go on."

"I've learned this business from the ground up. That's why I knew

how to yank out the deadwood, and cut costs."

"Not enough!" Magnusson said.

Orville Fox stared at the carpet, and his thin lips tightened. "I've only been a merchandizing manager for six months," he said softly.

Shayne asked, "Who do you think wrote that note?"

"I don't know," Fox said. "I can't help you at all there."

"Recognize the handwriting?"

Fox shook his black-haired head. "You've seen the envelope. The name previous to mine was struck out so completely that I couldn't decipher it."

Mike Shayne nodded.

Fox went on: "So we don't know the sender. Have you noticed the previous name?"

Shayne took out the house envelope. Whoever had sent Orville Fox this note had taken care to cross out the name. But on the line above the redhead saw another name.

"Who is Chalmers?" he asked.

"That's Miss Donna Chalmers, my jewelry and watch buyer. She obviously sent the envelope to a party which directed it to me."

Shayne asked, "Could it be that Miss Chalmers merely struck out the next line, making it look like there'd been another name?"

"That's possible," Fox said. "But it seems unlikely."

"Is Miss Chalmers in the building?"

"I'll take you down," Fox said. "And don't be fooled by her beauty. She's good looking."

The store president squeezed Fox's arm. "You've got a beautiful wife, Orville," he said hotly. "Keep your eyes off other women."

Fox frowned, mumbled something about narrowmindedness, and led Shayne out of the executive suite.

When they were crossing the furniture department, Fox said, "I still haven't gotten used to his jealousy. He has a fixation about his daughter. I'm not supposed to look at any other female, no matter how attractive she may be. God knows what would happen if he

ever caught me making a light, harmless pass at some flighty blonde . . . This way, Shayne."

II

MISS DONNA CHALMERS' office was located behind her department, and Shayne was struck by the contrast between this narrow, unluxurious cubbyhole and Magnusson's impressive offices.

Miss Chalmers was typing advertising copy for a watch promotion as the two men squeezed through the door. She stopped tapping abruptly and looked up from the machine, regarding her boss without a smile. Then her full red lips curved in a greeting as her gaze rested on the redhead.

"Mike Shayne!" she said huskily. "Welcome to the Miami Dry Goods treadmill!"

"Do we know each other?" he asked, puzzled.

"I've heard a lot about you," Donna Chalmers explained. "I used to date a reporter named Tim Rourke. He's with the *Miami Daily News.*"

The redhead grinned. "Let's keep Tim out of this, Miss Chalmers."

"Out of what?"

Shayne decided not to mention the threat note. But he handed Miss Chalmers the house envelope. She wore a complicated series of bracelets, which tinkled as she took the envelope and studied it.

"You sent this to someone," Shayne explained. "The next party directed it to Fox here. Now we want to know whom you routed it to."

Miss Chalmers blinked her long-lashed eyelids. "I mail several of these things a day," she said. "Let me think."

"Yes," Shayne said. "Try to think back, Miss Chalmers. How many of these house envelopes did you send on Thursday?"

Donna Chalmers looked at her desk calender. "On Thursday, I made the rounds of the branch stores. I was only at this desk for an hour in the morning. And I only sent one envelope to one party. It contained an invoice that came to me by mistake. It belonged to Walt Tunley, and I routed it to him . . . Why, what's it all about?"

"Tunley is my sporting goods buyer," Fox said, nervously edging from one side of the cubbyhole to the other, his dark eyes on the woman.

Before Shayne could question her further one of Miss Chalmers' sales people came to get a signature. Then a man from the advertising department brought a proof for her, and an assistant wanted to know something about an 'End of the Month' price.

"You're a busy gal, Miss Chalmers," Shayne said.

"Not according to Fox here," she said, her voice losing its amia-

bility. "He'd like us to set up couches in the office and sleep here."

"That's not amusing, Miss Chalmers," Fox said icily.

She tossed Fox a hostile look out of her dark eyes, then turned once more to speak to Shayne. "I hope to see you again when we're less hurried."

"So do I," Shayne said.

They stepped out of Miss Chalmers' office into the brightly lit jewelry department.

"This way," Fox said, in a tone of faint asperity, taking Shayne to his windowless office.

It was obvious that the rebuke he had received from Miss Chalmers had rankled, putting him in a somewhat surly, ill-tempered mood.

The windowless office was larger than the buyer's, but almost as drab. The walls were bare and the desk was covered with trays and papers.

"I like Miss Chalmers," Shayne said.

"She makes a good impression on people, but I don't trust her. Incidentally, as you must have noticed, she hates my guts."

"Because you drive her hard, or because you once made a pass at her?"

"What gives you that idea, Shayne?"

"Just a hunch. I might be mistaken."

"Your hunch is right, Shayne. Why should I deny it? One should never mix business with pleasure, and I generally don't. But one evening—we're often here in the evening—she put on an act of wanting me. But she really didn't. It was just a sex-tease production."

Fox tightened his lips. "I've given her notice. This week's salary check will be her last."

"Not because she resigned, surely."

Fox shook his head. "No, naturally not. She didn't produce enough business."

"Really?"

Fox strode impatiently toward his desk, his face a shade darker than it had been. "In a department store, we go by figures, Shayne. Sales figures. Each day, a buyer is judged by how much he can top the previous year's receipts in his department. If he loses too much over too long a period, we replace him. Especially in *my* division."

Shayne pulled at his earlobe. "How much notice did Miss Chalmers get?"

"A week," Fox said. "This is her last day here."

Shayne looked at the envelope again. "What about this sporting goods man, Walter Tunley? If Miss Chalmers spoke the truth—and we've no reason to doubt it—Tunley may have sent the death threat. What do you think?"

Fox gave his swivel chair a push until it spun like a top. "He's

got a good motive, all right. I have the job he wanted."

"How's that?" Shayne asked, regarding the other intently.

"Tunley has worked here for ten years. He's bright enough, but when the promotion came up, they selected me. I'd been a buyer here in hardware for only three years."

"It helps to be the president's son-in-law."

Fox rubbed his bony nose. "It so happens that I have the promotional talent and the drive which they want upstairs. I'm also prepared to put in the hours—nights and Sundays—which Tunley refused to do. At this level"—Fox pointed around his windowless office—"you need a kind of brutality, too. Let's not mince words about it. You've got to slap down people, to make them work harder for less money, and Tunley lacks that kind of ruthlessness."

Fox pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

"I have my own," Shayne said, and reached for a crumpled pack. "I'm going to turn over this note to a handwriting expert. If we're right about Tunley, and he hates you as you seem to believe, you'd better not do anything to make him suspicious before we know for sure."

Fox stepped from one nervous leg to the other. "I wish I had the time to go with you, Shayne. But I've got to take the buyers' sales figures for the day. Then I have to come back here, and do two urgent reports. I won't be out of this office until the janitors come around at nine o'clock."

Shayne consulted his watch. It was 5:30. "I'd like to see Tunley before I leave," he said. "And I'd like you to get me a sample of Tunley's handwriting, if you can do it on the quiet."

Fox escorted Mike Shayne to Walt Tunley's office.

"Is Tunley in?" Fox asked the merchandizing manager's secretary.

The girl looked at a roster on the wall. "He's at the branch stores today. He might be in later, but I'm not sure."

"We have branches in South Miami and Miami Beach," Fox explained. "Tunley ought to be back within the hour."

Shayne nudged him. "The handwriting—"

"Get me one of his recent letters from the files, Miss Simpson," Fox said, acting promptly on the hint. "I need a copy of his signature for a new merchandizing check list. Miss Chalmers' too—if you don't mind."

The secretary nodded and within a few minutes complied with his request. Fox thanked her.

From the door, Mike Shayne turned to him. "Do me one favor, Fox," he said. "Call me at police headquarters tonight, between eight and eight thirty. Or call Lucy

Hamilton, my secretary. I'll be in touch with her."

Fox tucked in his tie. "I'll live through it without calling you, Shayne!"

"Don't you want to know about the handwriting? Maybe we can even get some prints off the envelope."

"Okay, okay," Fox said impatiently. "I'll phone you at Chief Gentry's office by eight-thirty."

A moment later, the air conditioning stopped. The store was closing. Cash registers clanged everywhere, and Fox strode out of his cell to get the buyers' sales totals.

III

ORVILLE FOX'S office was on the main floor and when Shayne had walked the quarter mile to the exit, the door was already locked. He found his way to the basement exit, where a few late store executives and sales personnel were being checked for packages by the night watchman.

The watchman was a big fellow. Suspenders curved over his belly, and a .38 was strapped to his fat waist. When Shayne approached him, the watchman made a mock gesture of quick-drawing.

"Mike Shayne," he said, smiling.

Shayne's brows went up slightly. He stared hard at the man's face. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"Hell, yes," the watchman said. "I used to have the Flagler Street beat. When you started in Miami, remember?"

"Why, sure," Shayne said. "They retired you from the force?"

"That they did, Mike." The big hand reached out to shake Shayne's. "Name is Ernie Brecht."

"Glad to see you again, Brecht," the redhead said, watching as the man checked an employee's package, making sure there was a sales slip.

When Brecht sat down, Shayne took the chair next to him, and the two men lit cigarettes.

Smoking, Shayne asked, "Do you know the merchandizing managers around here?"

"I don't have much to do with 'em," the big man said. "But they nod and stop to talk a bit now and then."

"Do you know Fox?"

"Sure do. Don't know of another guy who has made more enemies in a shorter time. He's only been the merchandizing manager for six months, but I hear he had

a run-in with accounting, receiving, a fight with the credit manager. A real sly one, that Fox. Except with the ladies."

"How's that?"

"I hear he plays around." The fat watchman turned to an employee. "Six thirty, buddy. Time to sign out!"

The man put his name into a thick check-out book, and headed for the door. "You, too, Shayne," Brecht said, grinning. "Anybody who leaves after six, has to put the name and time down. Place is run just like a war plant."

"I'm not leaving yet. Tell me something, Brecht. How does Fox get along with Mr. Magnusson?"

"Well," Brecht said, "I can only go by the store grapevine. I've heard rumors."

"What kind?"

"Personal stuff, Shayne. And if you repeat it to anybody, I'll get canned."

"I'll keep it under my hat, Brecht."

Ernie Brecht cocked his white-haired head. "Well, it seems that the merchandizing manager has only two hobbies—work and women. Mr. Magnusson likes the work hobby all right, but he gets as mad as hell every time Fox steps out on his wife. She's Mr. Magnusson's daughter, as you may know. It also seems that he does plenty of stepping out. And the ladies take to him."

Shayne nodded and stood up. "Thanks for your help, Brecht."

"It's for old times' sake, Shayne. But please remember, I'm retiring from here real soon. If I get fired, I won't have a pension from the Miami Dry Goods."

"I'll keep mum," Shayne said.

Brecht showed him the check-out book, and Shayne signed it and passed out into the street. From a drugstore phone booth on the corner he called Will Gentry. The police chief had just left his office, but a sergeant called him back from the main door.

Shayne gave his old friend a brief fill-in on the case. "Will you wait for me?" he asked. "And get a print man and a handwriting expert?"

"It's six thirty-five, Michael. You're asking a lot—"

"You won't regret it, Will. After all, it's officially in your lap now."

"I'll wait, Mike. But since it's a police case, you know damn well you should have gotten in touch with me at once."

HALF AN HOUR later, Shayne gave Chief Gentry and Detective Lieutenant Jack Jackson the details about the threat to Fox's life. Shayne also produced the slip and the house envelope, which a fingerprint expert attacked at once, while Jackson pulled sample prints from the ID files.

As expected, the prints on the note were too fuzzy and too incomplete to be of much value. The

handwriting expert still hadn't arrived.

While they waited for the man, Shayne asked, "Do we have anything on a Walt Tunley? Previous convictions? Or anything criminal on a Miss Donna Chalmers? Just a summary. The details can wait."

Shayne put the two names on a piece of paper, and Jackson's bald head disappeared for a moment while he went to check. He was back shortly with the report that there was nothing at all on Tunley. Miss Chalmers, who was a lousy driver, had received several tickets for traffic violations during the previous year.

The redhead looked at his watch. It was 8:25, and Fox hadn't called. Was he still at the store, Shayne wondered. He checked with Lucy Hamilton, but his secretary hadn't heard from the store executive, and when Shayne rang up the Miami Dry Goods, the switchboard was already closed.

As a last resort, he looked up the merchandizing manager's home phone, and called Fox's wife. Fox hadn't come home.

Shayne turned toward the frowning police chief. "Fox promised to contact me here by eight-thirty. It's past the deadline and I haven't heard from him. It's got me worried, Will. I'm responsible for the guy."

"The way you described him, he's probably just too busy," Gentry said. "He's so wrapped up in that dog-eat-dog job of his he forgot all about phoning you, Mike."

"Or he may be dead," Shayne said grimly. "I'm going back to the store. Somebody coming with me?"

"I think you're way off base," Jackson said. "But I'll come along, anyway."

When they approached the department store, the shell-shaped glass and flagstone building was sheathed in darkness, and as they neared the dully gleaming display windows, the two men noticed that almost all the lights were out behind the partitions.

Jackson touched Shayne's arm. "Just a second, Mike. Look at that terrific fishing tackle in the window facing us. I want to take a quick look as I promised my young son I'd get him some." He went over close to the window to peer at the piscatorial display.

The restless redhead walked towards the last show-case. A street light shone directly into this window and the objects were more easily discernible. Shayne's attention was focused suddenly on an elegant male dummy clad in a summer suit and flanked by a lovely girl mannequin in a red bathing suit. A shimmery drape was strung deftly against the rear wall.

Squatting against the drape, legs neatly crossed and arms folded was the lean, dark-suited body of Orville Fox, merchandizing manager. His thin mouth was dis-

orted in a ghastly grin, and his black flint-like eyes were wide and staring.

"Come here, Jackson," Shayne said.

Both men looked at the window and Shayne said, quietly, "He's dead. You'd better take a look at him and then call the chief. Let's get inside."

IV

MIKE SHAYNE kept pounding at the basement exit until the ex-cop let them in. Ernie Brecht still wore his suspenders and his striped shirt, and did not seem alarmed, despite his look of startled bewilderment.

Jackson at once brushed past him and rushed through the store toward the window where the body had been seen.

"Where's he going?" Brecht asked, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "I'm—"

"Forget him," Shayne said. "Jackson, he's a cop! I've come back to see Orville Fox. Is he still here?"

"Let me take a look at the checkout book . . . Nope, he hasn't signed out."

"Could he—or anybody else—get out through another door?"

Brecht shook his head. "There's only one exit at this hour. Nobody can get past me without putting the name into this book. Not even Mr. Magnusson. As I told you—place is run like a war plant. The President doesn't have to sign out, but he does. Likes to set an example, I guess. Never could figure out why, but that's the way he is."

Shayne stepped toward the desk, and studied the checkout book for a moment. He glanced through it carefully and noticed that Magnusson had left at 8:15 with Walt Tunley, the sporting goods buyer, and Miss Donna Chalmers at 8:10.

"If you ask me, Orville Fox works himself silly," the fat watchman said. "He's driving himself so hard it's a painful thing to watch. Fact is, you're never secure around here, Shayne. This business looks decently run on the outside, but it's plenty dirty. You ease up, and you're out of a job."

Jackson's bald head appeared under the light. "Gentry will be here soon. I just called him."

"Did you tell him to keep the press out?" Shayne said.

"I sure did."

The watchman said, "Say, what's all this about?"

"I guess we'd better show him," Shayne said. "Come on, Brecht. Let's take a look at the summer suit window."

Brecht shot a harried glance at the store clock over the exit. "It's almost nine o'clock, Shayne. I can't leave this spot. I'm supposed to check in the janitors."

"We still have a few minutes, Brecht."

The watchman reluctantly stepped out of the building between the two men, and accompanied them to the summer suit window.

"Hell!" he cried, the instant his eyes came to rest on the gruesome figure at the back of the display case. "That's Orville Fox in there! Did he fall asleep?"

"Forever!" Shayne growled. "He's dead."

When the three men returned into the store and inspected the showcase from the inside, Shayne immediately knelt down to look at Fox's chest. No injuries. But when he tipped Fox slightly forward from the wall, he saw that a large bullet hole was in the man's back. The size of the wound indicated that the merchandizing manager must have been killed from close range.

As the police sirens were screaming outside, Shayne asked the watchman, "Did you hear a shot tonight?"

"I heard something that sounded like the backfire of a car. I didn't bother to check. Who the hell would think of a gun going off!"

Within twenty minutes, the store was filled with fingerprint men, photographers, the medical examiner and Will Gentry himself.

The police chief walked over to Shayne. "Hi, Mike. Seems your hunch was right!"

"Yes," said Shayne. "And I'm damned sore about it. I should've got here earlier."

After learning where the body was, Gentry sent his men to the window. He turned to the night watchman, whom he recognized. "Ernie, when did you see Fox last?"

"I haven't seen him all evening," Brecht said.

"Let's look at Fox's office," Shayne suggested.

Brecht took them there.

Shayne said, "That's strange. The lights are still on. If Fox planned to leave for the night would he keep the lights on?"

"He wasn't supposed to," Brecht said. "The store insists that everybody saves on electricity. And Fox is pretty stingy himself. I'm sure he'd have turned off the lights."

"That meant he intended to come back here," Shayne said. "He must have gone into some department."

"Could be," Brecht admitted.

While the print people got to work in Fox's office, Shayne looked at the paper-littered desk. The appointment calendar showed nothing for the night—Saturday—but there was an entry for Sunday morning 10 AM. It said, TUNLEY.

"That's the sporting goods buyer," Shayne told Gentry. "Did they identify the handwriting, Will? Shows how this has jolted me. I just didn't have time to ask."

"It was Tunley's, all right," the

chief confirmed. "We're going to pick him up."

"Let's first find out where Fox was killed," Shayne said.

"I'll get on the store lights," the watchman volunteered. "I know where the light panels are."

Shayne, Gentry and Jackson searched the sporting goods department, the book department, the hosiery counters—all of which belonged to Fox's division. No trace of a fight anywhere. But when they came to the jewelry and watch sections, Shayne let out a low whistle.

The glass top in the watch counter was broken. A few specks of blood were on the floor in front of the counter. A bullet was lodged in the rear wall.

"That's Miss Chalmers section," Brecht explained. "She buys watches and jewelry."

"She quit at eight-ten," Shayne said. "It was her last night here. She got fired."

Gentry cocked his head. "Why should anybody work this late when they get canned?"

"I don't know," Shayne admitted. "That occurred to me, too."

By this time, the medical examiner had finished his preliminary report. He said that only an autopsy would determine the exact time of Fox's death. But he could give a rough estimate. Fox had probably been killed two hours ago—around eight.

Gentry studied the checkout book. "This sporting goods buyer left at eight-fifteen. That makes him as good as a suspect as any."

"Let's take a look a him," Shayne said.

But when they got to the executive's beach house at South Miami around midnight, the Tunleys were not in. A babysitter who'd been sleeping on the couch, told Shayne and the others that the Tunleys were at a party.

"And they are sleeping there overnight," the babysitter said.

"Sleep where?" Shayne wanted to know.

The girl didn't have the address.

Gentry suggested that they stake out the house, but Shayne said, "Suppose you let me handle this in the morning, Will."

"That's in our department, Mike," Gentry protested.

"I have an angle. Just let me try it. You can send Jackson around to pick Tunley up if he makes a suspicious move. I'll keep you posted, Will. I promise."

V

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE left the Tunley beachhouse he called up Paul Magnusson at his home and gave him the bad news of Orville Fox's death. He had a hunch Gentry hadn't contacted the executive yet and he was right. Magnusson took the news better than the redhead had anticipated.

The president's chief worry was the press. Had any newspapermen come to the store with Gentry? None had, Shayne assured him.

"Were there any definite clues as to who might have killed Fox?" Magnusson asked.

"A few," Shayne admitted, "but there's still plenty of spade work to be done. In fact, I need your assistance, too."

Magnusson didn't reply immediately. "Did you hear me?" Shayne said. "I need your help. For one thing, I need your credit manager's name."

The store president gave it slowly. "John Malcolm," he said.

"Can you make it to the store around noon, tomorrow? I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Magnusson."

"I'll try."

"Please meet me in Tunley's department," Shayne said, and hung up.

It was nine o'clock when Shayne phoned the credit manager's home. There was no sorrow in Malcolm's voice when Shayne announced the death, but unlike the store president, the credit manager immediately offered his help. Shayne told him to go to the store and get a list of all the purchases made by the murder suspects during the past six months, with details of the items bought at the store, as well as the amounts.

"Please leave the list with the watchman," Shayne instructed him.

EARLY THE NEXT morning, Shayne drove to Tunley's house. It stood on stilts over the beach, flanked by a garden of dwarf pines and palms. Shayne walked down to Tunley's unfenced sand strip, the warm sun on his back. There were two towels on the sand, Shayne noticed—"His" and "Hers." But their owners were nowhere about.

Shayne strode to the rear of the house, and cocked his ears under the stilts. Nobody seemed to be home. The garage that held up the second storey smelled of rubber, salt and linen, and as Shayne made his way toward the staircase which led into the building he saw that there was a wicker bar at the far end of the first story porch.

Shayne turned to the bar and helped himself to a brandy. He moved towards the kitchen, then strode through the rambling beach house, inspecting everything he saw with idle curiosity. In one of

the bedrooms he came across a pair of bathing trunks in the waste basket. They were still slightly moist, as though they had recently been used—certainly no earlier than yesterday.

Shayne tugged at his left earlobe, then inspected the wet suit. Why should anyone wish to throw away a perfectly good pair of bathing trunks? On the side of the trunks he noticed two initials. "O.F." Orville Fox? Probably!

Just then the redhead heard the hum of an outboard motor. Swiftly it grew into a roar. He went to the nearest window and saw a speeding boat with a woman behind the wheel and a man on water skis behind her—obviously the Tunleys. On the bright blue bay, he could make out the boat racing across the corrugated surface in smooth curves. The man was good on water skis.

For a minute, Shayne admired the arcs and bows and straight lines on the glittering expanse. Then he noticed that the boat was approaching the house.

Shayne went downstairs just as a young man came swishing out of the water on water skis. The skis sunk, and the man jumped neatly out of the gear, dragging it behind him onto the wet sand. He was well-built, well-tanned, and in his thirties, with a hard, narrow-eyed face. He looked suspiciously at the redhead.

Mike Shayne wasted no time in introducing himself. The young man relaxed a little then, his expression becoming more friendly.

"Yes, of course," Tunley said. "My secretary told me you were at the store, yesterday, Mr. Shayne. And Miss Chalmers, too, said you'd talk to her."

Shayne nodded.

"Glad you helped yourself to some brandy, Mr. Shayne," Tunley said. "Believe I'll join you."

They went back upstairs.

The brandy bottle didn't contain anything as smooth as Monnet, but it hit the spot all the same. Tunley plopped some ice cubes into his own glass, added soda. "Cheers."

A good-looking young woman in shorts finished tying up the boat on a small marina, and soon joined the two men, her hips swinging. "My wife," Tunley said, holding her arm.

The redhead introduced himself, then watched the well-shaped legs disappear. Mrs. Tunley came back with a coke. "Welcome to the beach, Mr. Shayne!"

"I'm going to abuse your hospitality," Shayne said. "With a question."

Tunley sipped at his drink. "Shoot."

"How come you're out here? And not at the office?"

"Should I be at the office?"

"That's right," Shayne said. "You had a date with Fox at ten this morning. It's nine forty-five."

"How do you know about the date?"

"I saw the note on Fox's appointment calendar."

"Good work, Shayne! I'm glad you're joining our store rat race. Did Magnusson hire you to supervise the buyers?"

"You still didn't answer my question, Tunley."

The sporting goods man gracefully let himself into a chair, the ice in his glass clinking. "I've changed my mind about the Fox appointment."

"All this Sunday work," Mrs. Tunley said. "This poor guy has been called in every Sunday since Fox took over. He could just harrass my husband so much and no more."

Shayne kept silent.

"I want to tell you something," Tunley said. "There are two kinds of people in this department store business. Those who give the others ulcers like Fox. Or those who get them. Like most of his buyers. I don't belong to either group. I decided to keep my health and my sanity.

"Fox has pushed me enough. He's taken away half my staff. He has asked the branch store managers to claim that I'm not sending the right merchandize. He has also asked one of my sales people to send in a report that I'm inefficient, which I'm not. Fox has tried to blacken me with the store president. And you know why? Because I was a rival for his merchandize manager's job."

"You wanted it, didn't you?"

Tunley drained his glass. "You're damned right! But Orville Fox got it. The fifty-thousand-a-year jobs stay in the family. Yet Magnusson doesn't make him feel safe. That's why Fox is afraid I might still get the job."

"You might now," Shayne said sharply.

"Now?" Tunley repeated, without grasping the meaning behind Shayne's words. "Frankly, I've reached a point where I no longer care."

"Bravo!" said Mrs. Tunley.

"This morning, I made up my mind that he can needle and push and squeeze and intrigue all he wants. I'm through getting excited about it. From now on, I'm doing my job in the hours set by me—an executive—and if Fox doesn't like it, he can go right ahead and fire me."

"He won't," Shayne said. "Orville Fox is dead."

"What?" Tunley's eyes opened widely in astonishment.

"Fox was shot last night. While you were in the building."

Tunley's eyes turned to hard slits. "This will make me a suspect in the eyes of the police, but I'm still going to say it. Fox had it coming. He was quite an SOB. Oh, not only with me, but with the whole store. In six months, he made nothing but enemies. He

went into this position with a broadaxe, and slashed right and left, trying to please them upstairs. He behaved like a man in a jungle.

"He fired men and women who'd been there a dozen years. He accused the chief accountant of dishonesty, the receiving-room manager of incompetence. He discharged stock boys who depended on their jobs to get through school; he let half the sales clerks go, who needed their miserable pay. He didn't care on whose feet he trampled."

"Is that why you wrote him that note?"

"What note?" Mrs. Tunley asked.

The buyer got to his muscled legs. "When Fox asked me to come this Sunday, too, I wrote him a note saying that I'd kill him."

Mrs. Tunley put her slim arms under her husband's. "You didn't mean it, I'm sure."

Tunley faced his wife, and gently massaged the back of her soft neck. Looking deeply into her eyes, he said, "We both know that I had plenty of reasons to kill him."

"You didn't, darling. I was—faithful to you!"

Shayne saw the buyer's face turn red under the tan. "Fox tried, didn't he?" Tunley asked.

"Tried what?" Shayne asked gently.

Tunley suddenly tossed his glass into the floor. "My note was a threat, Shayne! No more. If you don't believe me, you can go straight to hell."

"I don't know about hell, Tunley. I'm going to your office to search it. With you and a police lieutenant."

Could the sporting goods buyer have done it? Shayne wondered. The motive seemed to be there. Fox had gotten the job which Walt Tunley wanted, and had pushed the buyer toward a breaking point. *Some of them crack up in this business,* the night watchman had said. *It looks glamorous on the outside, but it's a dirty dog-eat-dog business. What would be the sense of denying it?*

"Search all you want," Tunley muttered under his breath. And before the redhead knew what was happening, Tunley's clenched right fist hit him a grazing blow on the jaw.

Shayne grunted, moved in fast and hit the clumsy buyer with a left to the midriff and a terrific blow on Tunley's nose. Tunley curved in pain and went out cold, an inert heap on the floor. Blood poured over his face.

The detective straightened, kneading his jaw.

Tunley's shapely young wife looked panic-stricken and with a scream ran toward Shayne. "Why did you do that?" she cried.

"Why did he attack me?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know! He wasn't himself. He must have lost his head. You suspected him, and he's innocent."

"A helluva way to show it. You trying to clear him, Mrs. Tunley."

"Yes," she cried passionately. "I'll do anything."

"Just answer a question."

"I will! Anything!"

"What were Fox's bathing trunks doing in your waste basket? Was he swimming out here recently?"

Mrs. Tunley turned to her husband, who had opened his eyes.

"Was he?" Shayne insisted. "Did Fox come here while your husband worked? Did Fox make a pass at you?"

She didn't answer. She was kneeling beside her husband, her pretty, bronzed head lowered. Shayne knelt next to her, his face grim and accusing.

"Your husband found out, didn't he? He loves you, and he made a scene, didn't he?"

"Nothing happened between me and Fox," she said softly. "And Walt believed me."

"But he was angry at Fox for trying."

Tunley lifted his head from the floor. "Not angry enough to kill him, Shayne. I'm telling the truth."

"All right," Shayne said. "Get into your clothes. We're taking a Sunday drive into the Miami Dry Goods."

VI

SHAYNE PARKED his car before the deserted glass and flagstone building, and got out. Tunley was walking with effort. The sporting goods buyer did not look at the window where Fox's body had been discovered the previous night.

A uniformed guard let them into the building. "Brecht told me you might be back, Shayne. And the credit manager asked me to give you this list."

Shayne nodded, and thanked him. He walked up to the inert escalator that led to the main floor. The square and rectangular showcases, the wide aisles, the columns stretched out silently and mysteriously before him. He passed the jewelry and watch counters, bent briefly over Miss Chalmers' selections, and then moved on through the other empty, cloth-shrouded departments to Tunley's office.

"Some of my domain," Tunley said, pointing to a small plastic craft in the middle of the display floor. The buyer's tanned hands showed Shayne the other merchandize—tents, camping equipment, football and baseball gear, tennis racquets, then stopped before the large rifles and bows and arrows that hung in a vertical glass case.

"I'd like to see your office," Shayne said.

Tunley nodded and limped

ahead. His office was no more than a cubbyhole—very similar to Miss Chalmers'—between the department and the stock room. There were two oak tables—one for the assistant buyer, whom Fox had discharged to save money—and a number of files and folders in dusty book cases.

Shayne went to the desk and opened a drawer. It contained store purchase forms, envelopes, pencils and a .38 revolver. The redhaired detective sniffed at the muzzle, then set the weapon down again.

"I told you," Tunley said. "This thing hasn't been fired. I wrote the threatening note, but I didn't kill him."

Shayne's expression did not change. "Where were you last night around eight?"

"At Mr. Magnusson's office."

"Where?"

Tunley's eyes narrowed. "I was with the store president on the fourth floor. Telling him about Fox and my wife."

"How did he take it?"

"Magnusson was quite angry. Anybody who cheats on his daughter really upsets him."

"All right," Shayne said. "I'll check on it. Jackson's here now, and we'll see what Magnusson has to say. You're not to leave this floor, understand?"

"Don't worry, Shayne," Tunley said. "I'm in trouble enough as it is. I was half out of my mind when I hit you. It wasn't the act of a completely sane man."

"We'll talk about that later," Shayne said. "Jealousy has sent a lot of well-balanced men off the beam. You resented Fox's passes at your wife and brooded over it. My suspicions sharpened your anger and frightened you."

Five minutes later, Mike Shayne and Jackson sat in Paul Magnusson's office, listening to the small, sharp-featured little man.

"I'm glad to provide Walter Tunley with an alibi," Magnusson said. "My sporting goods buyer came to see me at seven forty-five. I know the exact time because my secretary keeps track of all the visitors on her appointment pad, and she was there last night.

"Tunley stayed twenty-five minutes, telling me about his troubles. Then we left together, including my secretary. I looked at the checkout book again this morning just to make sure of the time. We all left at eight-fifteen."

"Did you see Fox on your way out?"

"I did not," Magnusson said.

"Why not? You had every reason to, Mr. Magnusson."

Magnusson managed a smile. "A man should never have an important talk with another man when he is angry. I preferred to cool off, to sleep on the problem. After all, Mr. Shayne, I'm the head of this magnificent store. I have my dignity to consider."

Shayne turned to the lieutenant. "What do you think?"

"I believe him. Besides, he would never be strong enough to drag Fox's body to the window."

Shayne rubbed his angular face. "I'll meet you at Gentry's office round six. I've got to make a call first. I think I have a good hunch."

VII

THE HUNCH WAS reclining voluptuously in a redwood lounge, her gold hair gleaming in the sun. She wore a white bikini, contrasting nicely with her red toenails. From the sunroof of the apartment house, the view spread across Miss Donna Chalmers' entrancing profile to Biscayne Bay, palms, and Cadillacs.

"A penny for your dreams," Shayne said.

She opened her eyes, which were as dark and heavy as a gypsy's.

"Orville Fox sent me," Shayne said.

"Then you can go away again."

"But I won't."

Donna Chalmers said huskily. "I'm through at the Miami Dry Goods. Nobody can drag me back."

"I'm not so sure," Shayne said. "Fox is dead."

Donna Chalmers rose from the lounge, and she was taller and stronger than Shayne had expected. "Heart attack?"

"No, a bullet through the back."

Donna Chalmers narrowed her eyes. "Forgive me for being so callous. That calls for a celebration. Will you come downstairs and have a Martini with me? On the rocks?"

"You can leave out the rocks, Donna."

Donna Chalmers' apartment was neat, with every pillow in place, and every stick of brown contemporary furniture well dusted.

"Let me mix the drinks," she said.

Over her Martini, Donna Chalmers said, "If you're looking for suspects in this case, I make a good one. I hated Fox. Oh, not only because he fired me, but because of the kind of man he was. He hounded one buyer so much that he attempted suicide. He planted a dollar bracelet in the handbag of a sales girl—one of my girls who was due to retire after twenty years—so that he could discharge her without paying her a pension. He really crawled upstairs, and kicked those under him."

"Why did he fire you?"

"My receipts were down, Mike. Everybody sells cheap jewelry and cheap watches these days. Every drug store, every Five and Ten competes with us. It wasn't my fault. I'd been on the job for many years, and I always held my own. I really think that he found a buyer for less money—I was getting

two hundred a week—so he could save something for the management."

"You're sure Magnusson wouldn't have helped you, Donna?"

"That white-haired rat?"

"I don't know, Shayne said. "That's why I'm asking you."

Donna Chalmers tugged at her robe. "Magnusson is a chilly character. The type who'd step over a dead person just to take a cash register reading."

"I have one last question. Did you know that Fox was killed at the watch counter?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't."

"Somebody struggled with Fox last night at that counter. We found it broken."

"The store closes at five-thirty. I left shortly after seven. I didn't see Fox."

"You left at eight-ten, according to the book."

"I beg your pardon?"

Shayne said, "There can be no mistake. I examined the book very carefully. There's an eight-ten after your signature."

She stared at him. "Unbelievable. I was here by eight. In this apartment."

"In company?"

"I wish I had company," she said, smiling. "Male, that is. No, I was alone, Mike."

"Did anyone see you enter the building?"

"I'm afraid not," she said.

Donna walked toward the Martini shaker as though she could find inspiration in the ice cubes. As she poured herself another drink, she exclaimed, "Wait a minute! I have it, Mike!" She turned. "I got a traffic ticket at seven-thirty. On the Causeway. I made a right turn out of a left lane—"

She ran into the bedroom and came back with the citation.

Shayne stuffed it into his pocket. "Like to have a late drink with me tonight?"

"Why, of course, Mike!"

Shayne told her where and when.

IT WAS SHORTLY before five when the redhead got to Gentry's office. He quickly contacted the patrolman who'd issued Donna Chalmers' traffic ticket, and got a confirmation of the time. With this piece of news, Shayne walked into Jackson's office.

Shayne handed the bald lieutenant a photostated page of the store checkout book. "There's something screwy here, Jackson. And I tell you what it is. One of these figures has been erased. And a new time put in its place."

"How d'you know?"

"Take Miss Chalmers. She left at seven that night. Yet here she's signed out at eight-ten."

"How do you know when she left?"

Shayne told Jackson about the traffic ticket. "This means that her

entry in the checkout book may have been erased, and someone substituted the wrong time."

"To throw suspicion on her?"

"Naturally," Shayne grunted. "Especially on her because of the broken watch counter! And I'll tell you who doctored up the figures. The night watchman. Let's drop in on him."

VIII

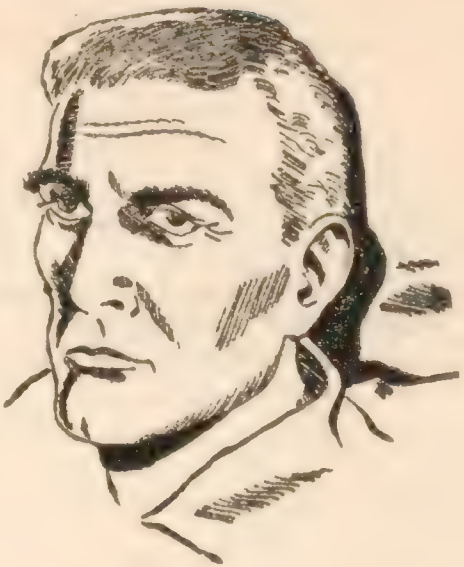
ERNIE BRECHT lived in a large, old apartment house near the store. A rickety elevator took the two men up to the sixth floor. Brecht's apartment was 6C, and he was in.

"Good evening, Mike. Hello Jack," he said, waving his hands in a gesture of welcome. "This is a pleasure I didn't expect."

Shayne strode into the small apartment, which seemed even smaller because of the many boxes stacked against the walls. They were all sizes and shapes, including department store gift boxes, and egg boxes and cigar boxes. In the miniature kitchen, more paper containers stood against the wall. In the tiny bedroom, new fishing gear was heaped on the ground.

"The store is retiring me soon," Brecht grinned. "I like to fish. How about you fellows? And what can I do for you?"

"We need some information," Shayne said.



Brecht seemed a little taken aback by the redhead's brusque tone and all too apparent lack of friendliness.

Shayne pulled out the store book page. "Will you tell us why Donna Chalmers is checked out at eight ten when she left at seven on Saturday night!"

The watchman shrugged. "I'm not a mind reader. Maybe she made a mistake. Fox worked her to a frazzle, so she must have been tired. Which reminds me, I'm going on duty soon."

"What time is it?" Shayne asked.

Brecht pulled his shirt sleeve over his wrist. "Five twenty. And I'm due at five twenty-five."

"Let me see that watch!"

Brecht hesitated, then with obvious reluctance unstrapped the timepiece and handed it to Mike Shayne. His face wore a worried

expression as he gazed intently at the redhead, and in turn, at Jackson.

Shayne said, "Your watch comes from the Miami Dry Goods."

"You're nuts!" Brecht said.

"How do you know? Mike?" Jackson asked. "The watch could have been bought any place in town!"

Shayne shook his head. "Only the Miami Dry handles this brand. They call it a private brand."

Brecht rubbed the watch dial. "It cost ten bucks. I bought it."

"Where's the receipt?"

"I threw it away."

"Like hell you did," Shayne growled, pointing at the egg cartons. "You're not the kind to throw away anything. Besides, when you buy any item at the Miami Dry on your discount card, the clerk has to make out a ticket, whether you charge it or pay in cash. They have to keep track of the employee discounts. I had a list made up by the store credit manager for all the suspects, and you haven't bought a damned thing for the past year!"

"Maybe I bought the watch two years ago."

Shayne said, "I'm sure this is a model, just put into the store. Shall I call Miss Chalmers to confirm it?"

"No need to," Brecht said slowly. "It's a late model."

"How did you get it?"

The watchman swallowed.

Shayne took him by the lapels of the green sports shirt. "Would you like me to call the reporter, who followed us here from headquarters? Tim Rourke is downstairs. He'll be glad to give you a little publicity."

Brecht shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mike. I stole the watch. I'll take it back!"

Shayne held on to the lapels.

"Listen," Brecht begged. "Please. I worked in that store for ten years. You're a slave there. They treat you like dirt. People like Magnusson and Fox leave every night without greeting you. You're underpaid, and you don't get a single sample. Yet they walk out with their cases full of free stuff which the manufacturers give them. This was only a cheap watch, Mike!"

"It didn't belong to you!" the redhead said. "You were supposed to guard the merchandize, not pilfer it!"

He swung about and walked in long strides toward the boxes. A new pair of rubber boots came out of one box, a thermos bottle from another. Almost every carton contained fresh goods, very carefully packed.

Brecht had slumped into a chair, his big head bowed. "Look, Mike, I'm due to retire. Give me a break. Don't turn me in, or they'd take away my retirement pay. It's only twenty bucks a

month, plus my social security. Have a heart!"

"Not on you."

"I've been on the force, and it'll be hell on wheels to go to jail. Let me take the stuff back, and nobody will know."

"You better haul him to headquarters," Shayne told Jackson. "You see, he's a murderer, too!"

Brecht mopped his face. "So I'm a thief. That still doesn't make me a murderer."

him. The watch business hadn't been good for a few days, and the merchandizing manager wanted to find out why. Perhaps the displays weren't right. So Fox went behind the showcase, and started to rearrange some of the watches.

"Perhaps he tried a new pattern. Anyway, he must have been inside the rectangle of the counters, bending down, and out of your line of vision, Brecht. You didn't see him as you slipped off

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NEXT MONTH **A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET**

MURDER STRIKES OUT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When Murder elbows its way into America's national game a seventh-inning stretch is dramatically ruled out for the Redhead.

"But it does!" Shayne said.

"What do you mean?"

"Last night, Fox surprised you. I've a pretty good idea how it was! He'd come out of his office after eight, walking fast and silently. He wore a dark suit, and the store was almost dark, so you didn't see the sheet from the watches that were on top of the case. You still didn't notice Fox when you grabbed one watch, put it in your pocket, and then went inside the rectangle to get another watch for the top of the counter. But by now, *Fox had seen you.*"

"Yes he did," Brecht could only murmur. "Yes, he did!"

"You knew what it meant. Fox was the kind of man who'd make an example of you. You'd be fired, lose your pension, and prosecuted. He'd show no mercy. So you lost your head and jumped him. You threw him against the top of the case. That's how you broke the glass. Somehow, in the struggle, Fox must have gotten away. And you shot him in the back."

Ernie Brecht rose, his face drained of all color. Despair weighed him down until it seemed he was about to collapse. "Mike, I felt the moment you came on the case I was through. I went crazy when I killed Fox. I don't know why I tried to frame Donna Chalmers. I just give up!"

"Not yet," Shayne snapped. "Let me complete the picture. You didn't know what to do with the body, right? The janitors were coming at nine. So you dragged Fox into the show case, where it would be safe for an hour, at least. Then you wiped up what blood you saw, and erased Miss Chalmers' time, thinking she might be suspected. What a foolish move. For, we came, and it was too late for anything else."

Brecht wiped the sweat off his forehead. "You can take me in. Can I put a sports coat on?" he asked.

"All right, but make it snappy," Shayne said.

Brecht lumbered wearily into his bedroom, opened the closet, where the redhead—who followed silently behind him—saw two new suits, and a brown sports coat.

Instead of taking the garment off the hanger, the desperate Brecht dug his hand into the sports coat pocket and pulled out a gun. In a moment, he had the gun at the side of his head. Shayne was close enough to knock the weapon onto the narrow bed—with the edge of his palm.

Shayne pulled him back by the neck, while Jackson snapped handcuffs on the still struggling man's wrists.

"Let's go, Brecht! There's a cell waiting for you, and Donna Chalmers waiting for me."

"And a brandy for the three of us," Jackson said.

"Three's a crowd," Shayne said.

A NEW *JOHNNY, THE EDGE* STORY NEXT MONTH

You Forgot Something, Dear!

by CHARLOTTE and DAN ROSS

Snakes terrified Myers' wife. And that made the murder plan quite simple . . . or so Myers thought.

●

BRADLEY MYERS held up the round blue bottle. The fading afternoon sun flooding through the bathroom window highlighted its glistening surface. He smiled at his own reflection in the glass, slightly distorted. The curve of the bottle gave his sensitive young face and thoughtful blue eyes a slightly sinister expression.

With a relieved sigh he replaced

© 1961, by Dan Ross

the bottle on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. Since that ill-fated afternoon a year ago, when his heart had begun acting up, the doctor had warned him to always have the prescription handy. Three drops in a glass of water whenever he felt the strangeness coming back. It might be wise to take it along today, he told himself. Drowning Madge was sure to give him a few heady moments.

"What are you mooning about now, Brad?" his wife called from the living room of the summer cottage. Her voice was harsh and impatient.

"With you in a second, darling," he called back. He hoped she wouldn't notice the happiness in his tone. Madge couldn't bear to see him happy.

She was waiting by the screen door. A slim-legged, lovely blonde in a scanty black bathing suit that accentuated the highset hips, narrow waist and firm full bosom. In ridiculous contrast she wore an enormous floppy straw hat and carried a large handbag of the same material. The cold beauty of her face was marred by a frown.

"We're late now and the Starrs don't like to be kept waiting," she said. Bob said they'd hold dinner for us."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her she was the dish their tomcat-natured neighbor, Bob Dowling, relished most. Instead he merely nodded and said, "I'll get the boat ready. I suppose you'll want to make a last check of the place, as usual."

Madge gave him a sarcastic smile as he passed her. "Someone has to keep their wits about them in this house. If I'd depended on you we'd have been robbed the first week we moved in. I do have a lot of nice things, even though you count every penny."

Bradley didn't even bother to listen. He walked down to where the boat was tied to the shore. Pushing back a clump of bushes, he moved it directly by the path, so that Madge could get into it without difficulty. Then he primed the motor. This done he looked out on the lake, and saw with satisfaction there were no other boats around. The wide expanse of water was quite deserted. Then he hurried back in the direction of the cottage.

Madge would be testing the doors and windows now to be sure they were all locked. It was a ritual —part of her act to underscore her contempt for his complete incompetence. Not that she hadn't proved that to her own satisfaction already by the way she had carried on with his supposed crony and neighbor, Bob Dowling.

If Bob's wife was stupid enough not to have wised up to the situation, or preferred to ignore it, that was her business. But he had other plans. Bradley's pleasant young face became grim.

Madge never failed to get a lift out of belittling him, even in small ways. "Brad's so forgetful," she'd say. "I can't depend on him to remember a thing. He has no head at all."

She'd manage some variation on this whenever she could. And it often fooled people. He sensed that some of their mutual friends had, purely on Madge's say so, put him down as an absent-minded nimcopoop. Well, that was all right. It would help now. No one would suspect a moron of murder.

There was justice in doing it here. She'd insisted on their taking the cottage on the isolated lake just so they could be handy to the Dowling's summer place across on the other shore.

It was unquestionably convenient for Madge and Bob Dowling, especially on those weekends when he had to be away in the city on business. But it was mighty inconvenient for him at a time like this. He hated the boat, and neither he nor Madge could swim. She just wore those brief swimsuits for sunbathing, and to tease any casual male who happened to be in the immediate vicinity.

It was important that she couldn't swim. Equally important was the exhibition she'd given last week on the Dowling's lawn. A small grass snake had terrified her and made her almost hysterical. He had been impressed by the incident, and so had the Dowlings.

That fortunate occurrence would make his story sound right. He'd gone over it a good many times in his mind. "We were just starting across," he'd say, "when this tiny garter snake came out from under the seat by Madge. It must have fallen out of the bushes. And you know how much even small snakes terrified her. She jumped up screaming and before I could stop the boat she'd fallen over into the water. I tried to save her—but it was no use."

He'd manage to look grief-stricken and he'd enjoy seeing how Bob Dowling took it. The whole plan gave him a lot of pleasure.

As he came within sight of the cottage Madge was already halfway down the verandah steps. "Everything locked?" he asked her.

Coming up to him she eyed him suspiciously. "Yes. I certainly hope *you* haven't forgotten anything?"

He was going to mention his medicine, but realized it would only start a tirade, and he was impatient to get on with his plan. What the blazes! He shouldn't need it anyway. Just getting rid of this blonde nag and she-devil permanently would be enough of a tonic.

"Why no," he said with careful innocence. "I just came back to see what was holding you up."

Madge looked at him with a satisfied smirk on her face. And he experienced a twinge of alarm.

Had she guessed what he was up to, and had a plan of her own to turn the tables? But that was utter nonsense.

They were only a short distance from the shore when she taunted, "You know. I'm *sure* you forgot something, dear."

Bradley's expression was grim as he guided the boat. "Did I?" he asked.

"You haven't an ounce of brain." She rummaged in the handbag and triumphantly brought out his sun glasses. "You forgot to bring these. And you know the bright sun on the water always gives you a headache."

"Thanks," he muttered and took them. At least, she wouldn't be going over this item as a conversation piece to make him look silly before the Dowling's. She was never going to reach the Dowling's. He quickly surveyed the deserted lake and decided it was time. His heart was beating a little faster.

"Look!" He cried, shutting off the motor and pointing to the water.

"Where?" Madge half-rose and peered at the rippling waves.

"Right there, dear! See it?" And he gave her a neat push that sent her tumbling with a splash into the lake. Then he stared at the distant shore line in fascination until her struggles and choking cries ended.

He glanced at the water again. Everything was calm and placid now. Just the big floppy straw hat floating on the surface. A suitably grotesque marking buoy.

Then he noticed the matching straw handbag still on the bottom of the boat where she'd dropped it. The humor of it struck him. He swooped it up and tossed it in the lake as well, shouting: "Honey, you forgot your handbag! Imagine you forgetting anything!" Then wearing a broad smile he turned on the motor and headed back to the cottage again.

He was walking up to the verandah when the dizziness came to him. And then there was the familiar pain in his side. The doctor had been right. He couldn't stand much excitement.

He sank down on the stairs a moment, panting. But it had been worth it. He'd evened the score and he was free of Madge at last. Gripping the rail fiercely he struggled up. Just as long as he made it, got inside to his medicine, everything would be fine.

He fumbled with the key, finally managing to get the front door open. Everything was whirling around him, the darkness closing in. Perspiration drenched him as he staggered toward the bathroom. He reeled along, clutching the back of a chair for an instant, and then resting against the door frame.

At last he was in the bathroom. His trembling hands opened the medicine chest and groped for the familiar blue bottle. But he could-

n't find it. Cold fear shot through him and for just a moment he could scarcely breathe. The bottle was gone! He searched desperately, knocking bottles and pill boxes from the cabinet shelves. But the medicine that could save him was nowhere to be found.

He staggered back against the wall and slowly slumped to the floor, staring fixedly ahead, his eyes already glazing. And now he thought again of Madge's gloating expression as she had produced the sun glasses from her bag.

Of course she'd been willing to give them to him. Because she'd been saving the other, the most important part of her evidence of weak-mindedness for a triumph at the Dowling's. He'd left without taking his medicine with him. But she'd remembered, and had it safely in her straw handbag!

"I'M AFRAID, MR —— THIS WASHES ME UP. AS THEIR NIGHT WATCHMAN"

Inside Information

Johnny and the historically famous Horace Greeley were hardly brothers under the skin. But when it came to packaging rare advice . . . they stood shoulder to shoulder.

by LEW LIPTON

IN NEW YORK CITY there is a place called Greeley Square. They have a statue right in the middle of it erected to the memory of the guy of the same name, because he once cracked, "Go West, Young Man!" My idea was to change that advice to "Go South, Young Man"—with the easy dough!". So that is why, several months ago, I opened a racehorse tipping agency in that location.

A firm believer in the old Greek saying: "Never take the patch off of a sucker's eye," I rented a de-luxe suite with reception room. Although my square monicker is John Webb, on the glass door I had lettered: LONGSHOT MCBRIDE, *Turf Consultant.*

The walls of both rooms were decorated with framed pictures of great racehorses, past and present, and also famous jockeys who had autographed their pictures to me, via my own penmanship. I had engaged a curvy young redheaded secretary named Maisie who originally came from Brooklyn and echoed it in her speech.

A triple-threat girl with a keen sense of humor, her duty was to list and file the names, addresses and phone numbers of prospective clients I had bought from another retired tout; also to write attractive "come-on" newspaper ads for me in which I was always referred to as the "Turf Wizard" who had picked 38 straight winners in a row.

Last but not least, Maisie inter-

© 1961, by Lew Lipton

viewed each and every prospective sucker first to avoid wasting any time or getting me involved with John Law. Hers was a full time job.

I called her Red when alone, and she called me Johnny, a tag the hustlers had hung on me, only they added "the Edge."

Conscience never bothered me when it came to clipping a sucker or taking the edge, because I learned at an early age that all gambling is based on larceny—people who try to get something for nothing. Then again if I didn't separate them from their loot—someone else would. That was my philosophy, although Red never agreed with me. She was strictly on the level and had the uncanny faculty of sensing "live" prospects from disgruntled or dissatisfied clients whether via phone, wire, or mail.

I admit that selling alleged inside information on horses is a shady operation that is just outside the law, and on many occasions I had to grease the gendarmes and pretty high up too, so I could keep in action. I also learned many years ago that all money can buy besides people is—police protection.

Broke more times than the Ten Commandments, I just wanted to get my clutches on some greenbacks again as Mr. Wortle my landlord, a hot and cold Charlie, had threatened to dispossess me if I failed to dig up my office rent, which was long past due. I had often conned him along until now he was putting the pressure on me and I was desperate.

Wortle and I had something in common and I knew it, but never peeped. He acted as tough as stormy weather but inside was as soft as a new June breeze. That's why I knew how to handle him. As I walked into the office he was waiting for me. I told him I had a sure-fire winner, an eight-to-one shot in the Fifth at Belmont Park that afternoon that couldn't possibly miss.

"The nag's name is 'Don't Fail', out of 'Say It Isn't So', and 'The Light That Did'—very fine blood lines. He'll cakewalk in!"

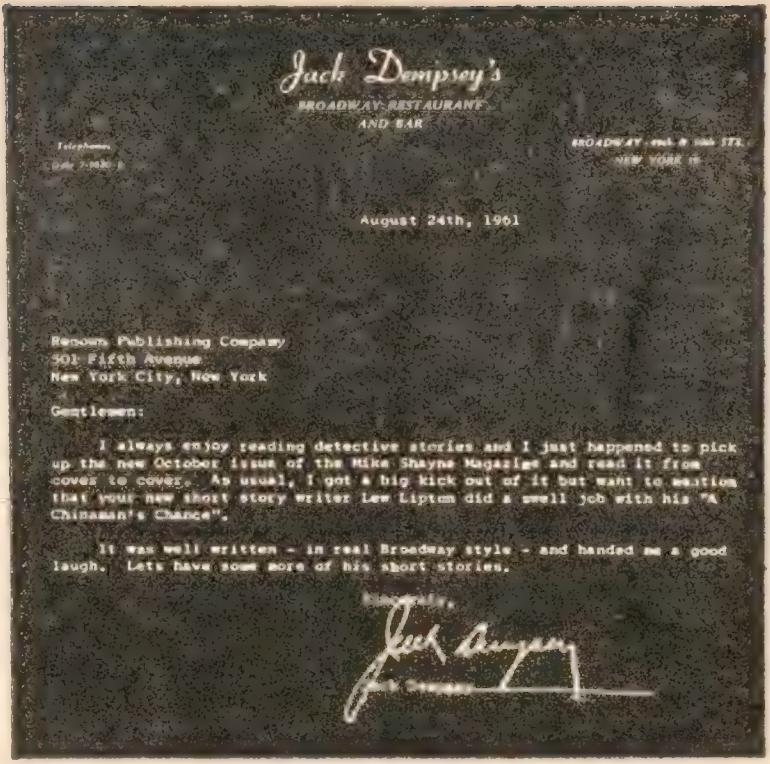
"He'd better," was Wortle's farewell warning, "or I'll cakewalk you out, desk and all!"

Before Wortle left, Red sensing trouble, had interrupted several times by buzzer and phone to cue me that I had important clients waiting in the reception room. The ruse had always worked before.

When he finally departed, two clients were waiting. One, a large, double-breasted bleached-blonde broad named Mrs. Crowley and a big, husky gent tagged Baxter. The lady entered first.

Mrs. Crowley was the whining type, always on the verge of tears. Briefly, she told me this story: An ex-circus performer, she used to assist her husband in his act of be-

Jack Dempsey LIKES JOHNNY, THE EDGE



Jack Dempsey's
BROADWAY RESTAURANT
AND BAR

August 24th, 1961

Renown Publishing Company
501 Fifth Avenue
New York City, New York

Gentlemen:

I always enjoy reading detective stories and I just happened to pick up the new October issue of the Mike Shayne Magazine and read it from cover to cover. As usual, I got a big kick out of it but want to mention that your new short story writer Lew Lipton did a swell job with his "A Chinaman's Chance".

It was well written - in real Broadway style - and handed me a good laugh. Lets have some more of his short stories.

Sincerely,

Jack Dempsey

---

ing shot out of a cannon. One afternoon, the cannon was overloaded and he became a memory and she—a widow.

After which she collected his insurance and turned to playing horses to forget her grief and also to get her mind off of the tragedy. I was all sympathy.

"But what can I do for you, Mrs. Crowley?" I politely asked.

"I only have twenty dollars left in the world, Mr. McBride," she informed me, tearfully, "and I want to win enough to open up a hot dog concession with the Circus when it comes to town. The owner said he'd let me, if I raise the money."

So, I gave her "Don't Fail", as a good thing, then added; "On Saturday, I have a 'Hundred Dollar Business Man's Special' going which I will give you free of charge, if 'Don't Fail' should happen to accidentally lose," I assured her.

She departed satisfied and optimistic with the promise to pay me the winnings of a five buck on-the-nose-bet, which was my payoff for my information. Red began to whistle a few bars of Tosti's "Goodbye Forever", a pre-ar-

ranged signal when trouble was brewing, or what I call "a bad beef."

It was then that the irate Baxter, pushed his way past Red and entered my private office in threatening manner. Pugnacious-like he came right to the point. He had received a tip from me the day previous on a billy-goat named "Ace of Hearts" that was lost in the shuffle.

"Don't tell me you're squawking because it lost, Mr. Baxter," I remonstrated, with pretended surprise, then played the con for him. "A man of your intelligence is certainly familiar with the hazards of a horse race. It was just bad luck."

"That's not my complaint, Mr. McBride," assured Baxter. I winced, then pulled myself together.

"Then what is it, Mr. Baxter?"

"My wife don't know I bet on the bangtails and I'm not supposed to know she bets on them. We both got a tip from you on a different horse in the same race. How come, Mister Turf Wizard?"

"You must be mistaken," I said trapped, "because I never give out tips on different horses in the same race!" I forced a prop laugh, then added, "That's ridiculous!"

"Oh yes you do, because here's the wire that she got." He took it out of his pocket and read: " 'Bottle Fly' in the first at Belmont is like stealing candy from a baby. Can't possibly lose.' And it's signed, 'Long-Shot McBride.' "

"There *must* be some mistake," I insisted.

"Maybe so and maybe not," observed Baxter. "You see my boss who I chauffeur for also got a tip on 'Lloyd' from you, too. That's *three* horses in the same race and I know only seven started. Here's the wire he got."

He showed it to me. Stymied, I buzzed for Red, the usual procedure in such matters, but she was too busy to answer immediately. While waiting, Baxter said, "If it hadn't been for you I'd have had the winner that paid fifteen to one."

"Where did you get that tip?" I asked, stalling for time.

"Tip nothing," snorted Baxter, "I dreamt about it and it won!"

"Do you dream often about horses?"

"No, sir, but when I do they always win!"

"How about last night?" I inquired, still stalling for time. "Did you dream about any horse winning today?"

"Yes, sir! Just one! 'Jeffersonian' in the Fifth. And he'll pay a hatfull, at least twenty to one. The worst he'll do is run second, so I'm going to bet him straight and place."

I started. "Oh, 'Jeffersonian' can't win," I declared. "I've got inside information straight from the feed-box who'll win that race."

Baxter's curiosity aroused, he

tried to quiz me as to the name of the beetle, but I refused without the assurance of the winnings of a five frogskin straight-on-the-nose bet for "yours truly".

At first he protested and rehashed the story of the three telegrams with the three different tips in the same race. As he grew belligerent, Red overheard and entered, in the nick of time.

"It was my mistake, Mr. Baxter," she assured sweetly, "and strictly my fault." Red was convincing but Baxter was as stubborn as a mule and really steamed up.

"Tell you what I'll do, pal," I suggested, to cool him off, "to show you that my heart's in the right place, I'll give you the winner in the same race with 'Jeffersonian' with a written guarantee—for free! It will pay no less than eight to one."

Satisfied, Baxter accepted the compromise and started to leave with the guarantee that was typed by the silent Red. At the door he stopped, as a thought struck him.

"I'm going to give this guarantee to my boss, Mr. McBride," he said. "He's a private detective and if 'Don't Fail' loses—good-night Mr. Turf-Wizard!"

The door closed after him. Then Red proceeded to bawl me out in no uncertain terms.

"A written guarantee!" she snapped sarcastically, "Why you're a mental case. It's nothing

short of insanity and guarantees nothing but trouble!"

"Am I going to have trouble with you, too, Red?"

"That's one bet you will win!" she snorted, angry. "A written guarantee." She emphasized each word with disgust. "You, with your great record of being unable to pick one horse in the money in the past thirty days, let alone a winner, giving a written guarantee. That is a laugh!"

"I was in a spot," I protested. "Forgive me."

Red's verbal onslaught continued, "You're too difficult to argue with," she declared in resigned manner. "You have brains and

salesmanship and could easily be a big success in any legitimate business if you applied yourself to it. But you refuse to think that way. You're always looking for the edge or trying to outsmart what you call a sucker. And believe me, Johnny, *you're* the *real sucker!"*

I remained silent in hope she had run out of gas but no such luck. She had to add a postscript. "By the way," she demanded as a thought suddenly struck her, "how did you happen to give your clients 'Don't Fail' today? Did you dope it out or take some handicapper's selection?"

I told her the following truth. The story of a hunch. Riding down on the subway I happened to see an ad in the newspaper that a chap opposite me was reading. What caught my eye was the advertisement of a new soft drink called "Don't Fail" with the slogan "A Sure Fire Winner!"

"Oh, a hunch, was it?" gasped Red in surprise.

"Exactly!"

"Well, Mr. Wise Guy, you're nuts because your hunch was all wrong. 'Don't Fail' is not the name of a new soft drink but of a new style brassiere. I ought to know because I have the newspaper on my desk and I'm seriously thinking of buying one the minute you pay me the six weeks back salary you owe me."

"Get it quick!" I gasped, "I mean the paper. Show it to me."

She did, and as usual, was right.

"How did you ever happen to make that mistake?" she asked. Weakly I explained that I had only given it a swift glance. Then again, the paper was folded. That's how I misconstrued.

"And what 'sure-thing' did you give Wortle and Mrs. Crowley?" she inquired, fearing the worst.

"The same that I gave Baxter, 'Don't Fail'," I confessed.

"Well, he'd better not fail or like Baxter promised, 'you'll be just a memory,' " she predicted. "You should have played safe by giving each a different horse in the same race as you always did. Then you'd have at least three chances of picking the winner. But you had to go out on a limb—"

"I know," I groaned, "but what can I do now?"

"Start praying!" she advised in caustic manner, "until you hear the results over the radio at five forty-five."

"I think I'll take a walk to cool off."

"Not a bad idea," she agreed. "Take your coffee break. It might steady you. Have you any money?"

"Two bits," I said and showed her.

"That's not enough," she said, "you know there comes a time in every man's life when he has to borrow two dollars from a lady—and visa versa."

As she slipped me two frogskins

I said, "Thanks, Red. I'll be back in time for the race results."

"All right. In the meantime I'll tune in on some music."

The door closed after me.

WE BOTH WERE tense as we listened to the broadcast of the race. "Jeffersonian" won but was disqualified for bearing over on his field in the stretch turn which automatically moved "Don't Fail" who was second, up into the winner's circle and placed "Jeffersonian"—second! I had heard about it, but it was the first time in my life I had ever caught lightning in a bottle!

"Saved!" I gasped and kissed her.

"So it took a disqualification and a wrong hunch to help you finally pick a winner."

"That's about the size of it, Red, and I won both bets."

"Both. How? Clear your conscience!"

"I took the deuce you loaned me and went to a bookie and bet it on 'Jeffersonian' to place. You know the horse Baxter dreamed about."

"You did?"

"I did!" I replied, now proud of myself. "By the way, Red, tomorrow when I get paid off you can buy that 'Don't Fail' brassiere that struck your fancy."

"I'm going to try and make you right just once," replied Red. "Give up the game."

NEXT MONTH

Without the Shadow of a Doubt

The New *Johnny, the Edge* Story

by LEW LIPTON

It's always a mistake to switch racing schedules on a temperamental horse . . . especially if he has been two-way trained. An hilarious Johnny, the Edge yarn.

A Piece of Death

AN OUTSTANDING CRIME NOVELET

by ALSON J. SMITH

ROCCO LOOKED AT his wristwatch. It was diamond-encrusted and very expensive, a gift from Johnny Borrio. It read: *Nine-forty.*

It was going to be a slow night. Outside, the joint's big neon sign flashed monotonously through the cold, driving March rain. CIRCUS LOUNGE, it blinked at the huddled figures hurrying along North Avenue, and in smaller, gas-filled red script, *continuous show.* There was the figure of a girl outlined in neon tubing, kicking tirelessly against the night and the rain.

Rocco LiMandri was not quite forty and he'd had the joint for fifteen years. He'd been born in this cruddy neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago and now he was back in it, but there was one hell of a difference. When he closed the joint and went home, it wasn't to a buggy tenement on Cambridge Avenue. He had a swank apartment on Lake Shore Drive and a Puerto Rican houseboy to look after it.

Summers he spent a month in Vegas and every January he went to Miami for three weeks. The oval, deeply-tanned, slightly pockmarked face, the dark brown eyes, the black hair beginning to gray at the temples, the smart, conservative, expensive clothes, the diamond ring on the left pinky, all

© 1961, by Alson J. Smith

The author of "Syndicate City," a book-length expose of Chicago crime, has pulled no punches in this savagely realistic story of violence and death in the Windy City. It's just about as strong as they come.

gave him the appearance of a wealthy sportsman.

In a way he was a sportsman; he owned a piece of a pro football team. But most of his dough was in the big-paying Outfit investments—liquor, mineral water, olive oil, beer, loan companies, and, of course, the joint. He owned a big piece of that—forty percent. The usual arrangement.

He really didn't give a damn about anything or anybody.

The old man had died seven years before. His older sister, Maria, was a teaching nun at the Sacred Heart School. His kid brother, Guido, was playing ball with a White Sox farm club. His younger sister Loretta had married a bus driver; they had three kids and Mamma LiMandri lived with them in a new housing development out on the West Side.

He never saw any of them anymore. But he sent them all expensive presents at Christmas time. None of them ever sent him presents.

The rain was coming down harder. There were only the usual dozen moody beer-drinkers at the bar, and the tables were empty. The three bartenders talked to each other about the horses, paying no attention to the strip show taking place on the runway at their backs.

Midge Plotnick was working. Midge billed herself as 'Scarlett Rebel', having once read a paperback edition of "Gone With The Wind". She was nineteen, with high young breasts. She liked to work strong and was already down to pasties and g-string. She caught Rocco's eye and he gave an almost imperceptible nod.

No snoops from the Crime Commission out tonight, although you could never be too sure. Midge pulled the pasties off and threw them to the beer-drinkers. She bumped slowly, half crouched, running her fingers caressingly over her torso. Then she pulled down the wisp of transparent net that covered her buttocks, and just before she stepped behind the curtain she yanked down her g-string and gave them a flash.

"That was Scarlett Rebel, ladies an' gentlemen!" bawled the fat M.C. "The gal that burned Atlanta! Any questions?"

Bored, Rocco looked out at the rain. Four boys in blue jeans and black leather jackets were running down North Avenue from the direction of Halsted Street. The joint had an awning that stretched from the door to the curb and the boys huddled under it, gawking at the blow-ups of the girls and listening to the hot music.

Rocco watched them with cynical amusement. Punks, from the neighborhood. Probably on their way home from the North Avenue Boy's Club down the street.

The boys tried to look into the

joint, but they couldn't see anything, They huddled, counting their money. Then they decided to try it. They opened the door and swaggered up to the bar, still brushing elbows.

Angie Lopez was working. She was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, pretty Puerto Rican girl with a coffee-colored skin, about twenty years old. She *cha cha'd* around the stage, not working too strong. The beer-drinkers were bored with Angie, but the punks stared at her with big-eyed, suppressed excitement.

One of the bartenders looked questioningly at Rocco. He came over. "Hi, fellas", he said, smiling.

They mumbled *hi's*. They knew this was it. They kept their eyes fixed on Angie, who smiled and threw them a fast bump.

"What did you guys want?"

"Four beers," said one of the boys. He had bad acne.

"How old are you?" Rocco asked in a nice way.

"Twenty, goin' on twenty-one," the boy lied.

"You got some identification?"

They shook their heads. "We been playin' basketball," one of them said. "Guess we left our I.D. cards in our lockers."

"Where's that?"

"North Avenue Boy's Club".

"Oh," said Rocco. "Hey, I used to play basketball there myself. Long time ago now." He smiled and they smiled back, somewhat uncertainly.

"Listen, you fellas got no identification, but—twenty-one, huh?" Rocco asked.

"Goin' on," the boy with the bad acne mumbled.

Angie had stripped her pasties. The beer-drinkers began to take an interest. The boys gazed at her, slack-jawed and nervous.

"Well, I tell you," Rocco said thoughtfully. "You can stay, since you're twenty-one. But I'm low on beer tonight. Cokes okay?"

"Okay," all the boys said quickly.

The bartender, who had been listening, quickly served four cokes. "Half a buck apiece," he growled.

If the boys were surprised at the price of the cokes, they didn't let on. They shelled out their half dollars, and the bartender, with a contemptuous gesture, flipped them into the register.

Midge Plotnick and three other girls came up and gave the boys a big hello and rubbed against them.

"How about a table, fellas," Midge said, "where we can have a little fun. Know what I mean, boys?"

Rocco, who had gone back to the window, came over again. "Don't crowd, Midge. These guys are friends of mine."

"Oh!" Midge looked disappointed. "Whatever you say, boss."

The four girls went over and sat at a table by themselves.

The fat M.C. was killing time while Linda Lolita was getting ready to do her Beauty and the Beast number.

Rocco said to the boys, "Back in my time the boss at the Boys' Club was a fella named Dave Berkman. Hell of a nice guy."

"Dave Berman got killed in the war," one of the boys said. "Anzio. They got a plaque down at the Club."

"Sorry to hear that," said Rocco. "Dave was a great guy".

"Yeah," said the boy. "I didn't know him".

"Before your time. Way before your time."

"Before my time," the boy agreed.

The fat M.C. was still stalling. A customer was moving unsteadily toward the rear of the joint. "You lookin' for the john?" the M.C. wheezed. "Right over there." He pointed to the door of the Men's Room.

Rocco said, "So old Dave's gone. Who's boss now?"

"You wouldn't know him. One-armed guy. Name's Knudson."

"Blond, blue-eyed fella, kinda skinny?"

"Yeah, sort of. Know him?"

"I think so. Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

Rolfie. Rolfie Knudson, from the old neighborhood. They'd been pals when they were kids going to the Von Steuben School. He'd heard that Rolfie had lost an arm in some goddam crazy war. But maybe this wasn't the same Knudson. Ah, hell, it had to be! How many one-armed Rolfie Knudsons were there in Chicago? He hadn't seen Rolfie in years, not since Rolfie had started to work his way through Northwestern and he had begun running with the Borrio boys. He didn't suppose they'd have a hell of a lot in common now.

The boys had enough money for two cokes apiece. They hadn't learned to nurse drinks like the beer-drinkers. After Lolita's number, they had to leave. Rocco knew they'd be back.

They did come back, and they brought others. Rocco let them buy beer, but he told the girls not to push drinks with them. The punks livened the joint up, being much more enthusiastic than the beer-drinkers. They smoked and swore self-consciously and called the girls by their first names, and the girls hollered back and worked better.

The kids didn't spend much, but they helped give the place a rep as a live spot and that brought the marks who did spend.

It brought the cops, too.

One night Captain Oscar Nordhoff's bagman, a sergeant from the 32nd precinct station, was in the Lounge and he saw half a dozen punks drinking beer and flapping

with the girls. He didn't say anything that night, but the next night he was back.

"These kids are way under age," he complained.

Rocco blew a smoke-ring from the fine Uppman he was puffing. "Are they? Who says so?"

"Anybody with two eyes can see it!"

"They say they're twenty-one".

"Twenty-one, my butt. You know what the law says."

"Sure I do. It says if a minor lies about his age in order to buy alcoholic beverages, he can be fined twenty-five dollars."

"Quit clowning, LiMandri. I'm serious."

Rocco's dark face flushed beneath the tan. "An' you quit callin' me LiMandri or you'll find yourself down in Thornton chasin' goats out of the weeds! It's *Mister* LiMandri to you, you thick harp!"

The sergeant tried to mollify him. "I didn't mean nothin', Mister LiMandri. I just wanted to let you know it can be made right."

"I figured that. How much this time?"

"Not much. Ten percent okay?"

Another ten percent would bring Captain Nordhoff's cut from the Circus Lounge up to $55 a week. The Captain was cutting up twenty-six joints in the precinct. In all he picked up about $1300 a week, but out of that he had to pay off down the line. Still, it was

a hell of a lot better than being a racetrack guard, which is what he had been before Johnny Borrio put in the word for him.

"Got to make a call downtown," Rocco said. He went into his office and called Johnny Borrio's unlisted number. "Johnny," he said. "Hello, Johnny. The man up here sent somebody around. He wants another ten percent."

"Okay, Rock, not worth arguing about. We'll fix the books."

"Right, Johnny. So long."

He went back to the sergeant, who was watching Midge Plotnick with great interest. "It's all right," he said.

"Good!" The sergeant heaved a sigh. "Mind if I buy a beer and watch the show for awhile?"

"No," said Rocco rudely. "I don't want you in the joint".

"No offense intended," the sergeant said hastily. He left.

II

ABOUT A WEEK later Rocco had another visitor. There were no punks in the place at the time, and the usual moody beer-brinkers were gazing morosely into their suds and pretending indifference to the slow-tempo strip tease of Janine The Tassel Queen.

Rocco was sitting alone at a table in the corner, having a cup of coffee. He heard the man who had just come in ask the bartender where he could find the manager. The bartender nodded in Rocco's direction, and the man came over to his table.

He was about Rocco's age, and he wore a cheap, shapeless gray suit, a brown felt hat, and a battered trench-coat. The empty left sleeve of the coat was tucked into a pocket. His hair was a graying blond, and it looked as if he cut it himself. He had very blue eyes and high Scandinavian cheekbones.

"You the manager?"

"That's right." Rocco didn't look up.

"My name is Knudson and I'm director of the Boys Club."

Rocco raised his eyes slowly. He said, just as slowly, "Hello, Rolfie."

The man looked puzzled. I don't believe I—" Then an incredulous grin spread across his face. "Rock!"

Rocco nodded. "Been a long time. Twenty years, huh?" He pointed to the empty sleeve. "Say, I'm sorry—where'd you leave that?"

"Spain. Place called Huesca."

"Oh!" Rocco didn't know much about that one. "Say, come on back to the office, where we can talk."

Rolf followed Rocco into the richly-furnished office at the back of the Lounge. Off to the right, in another back room, he could see three or four men playing the slot machines.

Rocco sat down behind the big mahogany desk and Rolf dropped into a comfortable red leather easy chair. Rocco offered him an Uppman. Rolf declined and pulled out a crumpled pack of Luckies. Rocco held out his desk-lighter.

"So what have you been doing for twenty years, Rolfie?"

Rolf told him—about working his way through college, going into social work, getting steamed up about Fascism, fighting in Spain, losing an arm at Huesca, and coming home to take a job with the Chicago Boys Clubs.

He didn't have to ask Rocco what he'd been doing. The tanned, well-groomed, expensively-dressed man with the diamond ring on his neatly-manicured left pinky bore little resemblance to

the runny-nosed *ragazzo* who had once lived in a cold-water flat on Cambridge Avenue, gone to the Von Steuben School, and played basketball at the Boys Club.

Rolf asked anyway. "What have you been doing, Rock?"

Rocco drew deeply on the Uppman and let the smoke drift slowly out of his mouth and curl up towards the ceiling in a blue cloud. There was a slight smile on his lips.

"Gettin' rich," he said, and Rolf caught the cynicism in his voice.

"Not married?"

"It's not for me."

They smoked in silence for awhile. Then Rolf crushed out his cigarette. "Rock," he said, "I don't like to bring this up, but they tell me some of my kids have been coming in here."

"Ah, a few once in awhile. Not many."

"They're under age, Rock, and all this is pretty bad for them."

"The kids got to grow up, Rolfie."

"But not this way. They come in here and see this stuff, and they begin to sneer at what we're trying to sell them."

A slow flush spread from Rocco's neck up to his forehead. "What you're sayin' is I'm corruptin' your punks, that right?"

"I suppose it is, Rock."

Rocco gripped the edge of the desk. "Well, I think whatever you're tryin' to sell is for the birds! How much do you make a week?"

"Fifty bucks—when I get it."

Rocco laughed contemptuously. "I got a piece of this joint. I got a piece of a football team. I got pieces—big pieces—of breweries, hotels, loan companies, an' God knows what else. I can put my mitts on half a million. You get a lousy fifty a week an' *you're* tryin' to tell *me* somethin'!"

Rolf said quietly, "You've got a piece of something else, Rock."

"I have? Hooray for me!"

"A piece of death. All this!" He waved his hand. "I didn't come here to preach to you, Rock. All I'm asking is that you stop letting my kids hang out here."

"You see anybody out there puttin' the arm on 'em? You see any girls tappin' on the goddam window?" Rocco took a deep drag on his Uppman. "You know, if anybody but you came in here and handed me this crap I'd throw him out on his duff!"

Rolf got up slowly. "I was going anyway, Rock."

Rocco laughed harshly. "Can't say that it's been too nice, old buddy. But no hard feelings, huh?"

"No hard feelings," said Rolf. He held out his hand and after a moment's hesitation Rocco shook it.

Lolita's Beast was unhooking the Beauty's bra with a clawed finger. Rolf watched for a moment and then went on out.

In the office, Rocco's face was

cloudy. He poured himself a double shot of bourbon.

One night about three weeks later Rocco was sitting in his office reading the morning *Tribune* when Red Wisenski, one of the bartenders, came to the door.

"That cop is here again", he said apologetically. "Says he's got to see you."

"Thanks, Red. Tell him to come in."

The sergeant was in plainclothes. Hat in hand, he shuffled in like a school kid sent to the principal's office.

Rocco didn't ask him to sit down. "Okay, make it snappy."

The sergeant handed him a copy of the next day's *Sun-Times*, folded to a two-column box on the second page:

"Beginning tomorrow the Sun-Times *will publish the first of a series of exposes of crime and political corruption in Alderman Matt Sauler's 41st Ward. The opening article will deal with gambling, prostitution, and night club nudity along the North Avenue rialto, where illegal activity centers around the Circus Lounge, a syndicate night spot operated by the notorious Borrio hoodlum, Rocco LiMandri. The articles will be written by our crack crime reporter, Edward Moriarity."*

Rocco laughed scornfully and threw the paper back to the sergeant. "Hell, it's happened before. We'll sweat it out."

"The man thinks this may be different. Seems there's a character bein' real bushy-tailed about it. Head man down at the Boys Club, a thick Swede named Knudson. He's been goosin' the Mayor, the Commissioner, an' the Crime Commission, an' he's threatenin' to go down to Springfield an' testify before that goddam Little Kefauver committee the legislature is settin' up."

Rocco's first thought was not of the joint or the Outfit but of Rolf. This surprised him. The crazy oddball could get hurt, starting something like this. The way that milk-wagon driver out in Northwood got hurt when he kept hollering about the crap game in the vacant factory out there. That was a big game.

Four guys with baseball bats had yanked the milk-wagon geef into an alley one morning; when they got through with him he was a hunk of cranberry sauce. The game was still running in the factory.

"What does the man suggest?" Rocco lit an Uppman.

"He wants you to stand still for a raid. Might stall off a hearing before the Liquor Control Board."

Rocco sighed and blew a smoke-ring. "What's he want to find?"

"Girl with no pasties from the waist up will be the easiest. 'Inde-

cent theatrical exhibition'—violation of Section seven of the Municipal Code."

"When?"

"In about two hours. He wants the story of the raid in the same edition of the papers with Moriarity's first piece. Figure's it'll leave Moriarity with egg on his face."

Rocco whistled. "That soon? Okay. Make it right on the button."

The sergeant left and Rocco phoned Johnny Borrio. Johnny had seen the papers and was undergoing a slow burn, but he reluctantly agreed to Captain Nordhoff's plan for the raid.

"Take the fall, Rocco," he said. "Morris Lazenby will be at the station as soon as you get there. I'm afraid we're going to have to do something about that Swede."

"Maybe he's got a price."

"You know I prefer it that way, Rocco. But I doubt if he has a price. These eggheads, these do-gooders, usually they don't."

"Let me talk to him, Johnny."

"Sure, Rocco. Talk to him and let me know".

He took everybody aside and briefed them on the raid. Routine, he said. The joint would be shut down for about two weeks. Angie Lopez agreed to take the indecency fall. There'd be an extra hundred in it for her, Rocco assured her.

Promptly at two A.M. the cops roared up in three squadrols, sirens screaming. The man didn't want anybody to miss this raid. He led it in person, resplendent in gold braid and looking as righteous as a deacon. A small crowd gathered on the street outside the Lounge. Inside, a bare-breasted Angie Lopez stood in the center of the runway, grinning uncertainly at the raiders.

"Cover that woman!" shouted Captain Nordhoff in a voice quivering with moral indignation.

A detective took off his topcoat, draped it around Angie, and led her off to one of the quadrols, trying to sneak a feel as he did so.

"Hey, baby," he said admiringly. "You got a bilt. How's about a date?"

"No hablo Ingles," replied Angie, looking bewildered.

Everybody waited quietly to see what the cops would do. The male customers were frisked and had to give their names and addresses. Then they were let go.

Finally, after a lot of milling around, everybody was let go except Rocco and Angie. They were taken down to the 32nd precinct station and booked. Angie was charged with a violation of Section 7 of the Municipal Code and bail was set at $500. Rocco was charged with permitting an indecent performance, and bail was set at $1500.

Morris Lazenby, a quiet, bespectacled little man, was ready

for any emergency. He peeled two thousand dollars off a huge roll and Rocco and Angie were free.

Rocco put Angie in a cab, kissed her goodnight, and sent her home.

Of all the girls who worked in the joint, he liked Angie the best. She wasn't the usual tough little tease tramp. She hadn't been in the country long and spoke lousy English. She was supporting her mother and six younger brothers and sisters, and they all lived in a cold-water tenement on Newberry Street, just off the ghetto.

He remembered another cold-water tenement, on Cambridge Avenue, and he felt sorry for this pretty little spik broad, barely twenty years old, paying for the groceries by shaking her butt at a bunch of drunks every night and then coming home to a goddam falling-down buggy tenement.

He never tried to make the girls in the joint; they got jealous of one another and then there was hell to pay. Besides, he didn't have to; he'd had movie starlets and society tramps and sleek, expensive pro's. But Angie touched him, somehow. The way Rolf did. The way all poor simple slobs did who didn't realize they lived in a jungle. He'd taken Angie to a couple of shows and football games and once, when they were both a little tight, he had brought her to the apartment for the night. He knew he was stepping way down in class and that Johnny wouldn't like it. Maybe that was why he did it, come to think of it.

He wiped Angie's lipstick off his mouth with a silk handkerchief. Four A.M. He wished he had taken Angie back to the apartment.

What a sucker-baited, loused up world, he thought.

THE CIRCUS LOUNGE drew a two-week suspension of its liquor license. Rocco and Angie had the charges against them nol prossed, and the joint reopened with all punks sternly refused admission and the girls grimly wearing net brassieres and big pasties and chaste black panties, which they kept on. The *Sun-Times* ran a long, self-satisfied editorial congratulating itself with having instigated the clean-up. The other papers sulked and hinted at bigger exposes of their own.

This was all according to the script. But there were some new lines. The heat didn't lift like it usually did because Rolf Knudson kept stoking the fire. There were talks to Parent-Teacher's Associations, service clubs, church groups; there were letters to the papers; there were consultations with Crime Commission officials.

And hanging over the heads of the ward people like a Damoclean sword was Rolf's threat to testify before the Little Kefauver Committee of the legislature.

The people were hurting. All over the ward bookies, policy bankers, H-pushers, gamblers, prostitutes, strippers, and cops on the take kept asking—"When do we get the word? And what's Johnny doing?"

Rocco hadn't seen Rolf lately, but Johnny had said it would be all right to talk to him. So one day Rocco climbed into his red Porsche and drove down the street to the Boys Club. He parked on Halstead Street, just outside the high wire screen that surrounded the Club playground.

A bunch of punks were playing softball and Rolf was pitching. The boys turned and looked curiously at the low, gleaming-red sports car and the tanned, dark, nattily-dressed man in gray slacks and powder-blue sports shirt who got out of it. The diamond on his left pinky glittered in the sunlight. The boys gaped admiringly. This guy was class!

"Hello, Charlie Root!" he yelled at Rolf.

Rolf recognized him. He threw the ball to the shortstop. "You pitch a couple of innings," he said. "I'll be right back."

He walked over to Rocco. "Hello, Rock. Charlie Root. Boy, does that date you!"

"Too busy to show me around? It's been a long time."

Rolf showed Rocco around the Club. "Afraid it hasn't changed much," he apologized.

It hadn't. It still had that smell of small boys and sweat and liniment that Rocco could remember. Not a good smell. There hadn't been many good smells when he was a kid.

When they were through looking around, Rolf took him up to his office on the second floor. They smoked and flapped about old times.

Finally Rocco blurted out, "Look, old buddy, I'm not such a jerk as to think I can give you any dough. But couldn't the Club here use a grand or two? Fix up the goddam gym or somethin'?"

Rolf looked at him intently, the corners of his blue eyes crinkling in the faint trace of a smile. "The Club could sure stand some fixing up. But what would you be buying, Rock?"

Rocco studied him for a second. No use trying to snow him. "Your health, Rolfie-boy," he said quietly.

"Free translation—I stop bucking you guys and the Club gets a couple of thousand dollars."

"Good translation. Go to the head of the class."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll get stomped. I've seen it and it ain't pretty."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Tell Mr. Borrio I appreciate the thought."

"Mr. Borrio got nothin' to do with it. It's my dough an' my idea. I'm really worried about your

health, Rolfie. Runnin' around makin' all these speeches—it ain't good for a person."

"I'll wear my rubbers and stay out of drafts, Rock."

Rocco shook his head despairingly. He got up and ruffled Rolf's hair in an awkward gesture of affection. "You goofball. Think it over."

Rolf saw him to the door. There was a big gang of kids admiring the Porsche. "Nothing to think over," he said. "Nothing at all".

III

THEY CAME TO the Circus Lounge one night about two weeks later. They bellied up to the bar, ordered beers, and watched the show. There were two of them, young, maybe in their late twenties. One was just under six feet tall with hard blue eyes, yellow hair, and a tough, scarred Slavic face. The other was smaller, maybe five-eight, a thin, rat-faced Latin type with brown eyes. They were dressed in flashy blue gabardine suits with padded shoulders and wide lapels, and they wore highly-polished, pointed black shoes.

Rocco had never seen them before, but he recognized them at once. Musclemen from out of town, brought in by Johnny to handle somebody.

There were ten or twelve customers in the joint, the usual moody beer-drinkers. The girls sat by themselves at the tables and looked bored. They hadn't pushed a drink or picked up a live one for six weeks, and it seemed like the word was never going to come.

Angie was working, but not strong. She was doing a *cha cha* and swinging her hips around, but that was all. She threw the newcomers a slow bump.

"Thanks," said the dark, thin-faced man. *"Muchos gracias."*

"You welcome," laughed Angie. "No charge. On zee houze."

Rocco went over to them. "Hello," he said softly.

The men turned and looked him over with slow deliberation. Finally the dark man said, "Hello. Hey, you got the right time?"

Rocco smiled apologetically. "My watch is thirty minutes slow."

It was the right answer. The big, square-faced man said, "You must be Rocco LiMandri."

Rocco nodded. "You boys from out of town?" He knew they wouldn't tell him anything.

"Yeah," said the big man. "We're liquor salesmen from Kentucky. We got a special on sour-mash bourbon."

"Sorry, I don't stock it."

"Say, maybe you can help us. We're lookin' for a fella lives somewheres around here. Man downtown said you could point him out."

"Could be. I know the neigh-

borhood pretty good." They were going to make him finger Rolf for the stomp.

The big man said, "When? We're in kind of a hurry."

Rocco thought hard. "Tomorrow afternoon. Around four-thirty, five." Rolf would be out on the playground if the weather was nice.

The big man grunted. The thin-faced fellow was watching Angie admiringly. "Looks like a hot piece," he said. "It figures—with the fancy strippers they got."

For no reason at all, Rocco felt like belting him. Guys talked that way about the girls all the time, even about Angie, and he didn't light up. He clenched his fists, then forced a smile. "The hottest."

Angie took her final bow. Her tawny golden body glistened in the spotlight. She smiled at the two strangers, thinking they were friends of Rocco's, and the dark man made a universal, obscene gesture.

Rocco gritted his teeth, but he kept control of himself. Lolita was on next, but her act was pretty tame for these guys. They could tell she was old. They turned and stared at the girls at the tables.

"Maybe you could knock us down to a couple," the dark man said.

"You bet," said Rocco. "But there's big heat on right now. You want to make 'em, take 'em out of the joint."

"Sure," said the big blond man. "They got places?"

Rocco couldn't conceal his irritation. "Ask 'em! How the hell do I know if they got places? Am I a goddam pimp or somethin'?"

The dark man laughed. "Don't take the gas, LiMandri." He lit a cigarette. "How about that little boog that just worked?"

"She's not a boog," said Rocco tensely. "She's a Mexican an' she's got Indian blood." He didn't know why the hell he said *that*.

"Oh!" said the big man, giving him a hard look.

Rocco beckoned to Midge Plotnick and Penny Copper, a buxom red-head. They came over, smiling and pulling down the necks of their cheap evening gowns to show some cleavage.

"Want you to meet a couple boys from out of town. They'd like to buy you kids a drink."

"Swell!" chorused Midge and Penny, smiling falsely.

The men and the two girls sat at a table in a dark corner. The girls ordered champagne. The men had rye with beer chasers.

Red Wisenski waited on them. When he came back to the bar he nodded towards the table. "On the house, boss?"

"Hell, no!" grated Rocco. "What am I, the Salvation Army? This is a saloon, not a goddam soup-kitchen!"

He went back to the dressing room, kissed Angie, and told her

to stay away from the two guys. Then he shut himself in his office, poured a double bourbon straight, and sat with his feet on the desk, sipping it. He sat there for a long time, getting a little tight.

When he came out, Midge and Penny and the two guys had gone. They had run up a tab of $47.80 and had groused when they found out it wasn't on the house. But they were heeled, and they had paid up.

They were at the Lounge at four the next afternoon. The blond one was Stan and the rat-face was Vito. They unbent enough to tell Rocco that they had come up from St. Louis to take care of a little business for Johnny Borrio, but that was all.

After a couple of beers they all walked down to the Boys Club. It was a nice day. Rocco wanted Rolf to see them. Maybe the sight of them would smarten him up.

There was a softball game going on. The three men stopped and joined a scattering of other men watching the game through the high wire fence. Rolf was umpiring, standing in a slight crouch behind the catcher. He wasn't wearing a mask and his graying blond hair fell over his eyes in the old, wild way that Rocco remembered from their kid days.

Rocco nodded towards Rolf. "There's your pigeon. The ump."

The two hoods looked carefully at Rolf, memorizing him. "A one-winger," said Stan. "Hell, that makes it easy".

"Easiest mark I ever seen," giggled Vito nervously.

Rolf hadn't seen them yet. The batter swung too soon and lofted a high foul past third base and over the wire fence. Rocco stepped backwards a few feet and caught the ball with easy grace. Rolf saw him. He looked curiously at Stan and Vito, nodded recognition to Rocco, and went back to the game.

The three men sauntered around the block and down the alley behind the Boys Club. Rolf's 1948 black Plymouth two-door was parked at the back door of the Club, as usual. It had been rigged with a special gear-shift so that it could be operated with one hand.

"That his junk?" asked Stan contemptuously.

"Yeah," said Rocco.

They walked around the car, studying it casually. They also noted the location of doors going into the Club and asked Rocco about the arrangement of rooms and stairways inside. He told them what he knew, which wasn't much.

They were back the next day with a car, a big new gray Chrysler sedan. For the following week they made the Lounge their headquarters. Most of the time they hung out on the corner of North Avenue and Halsted Street, casing the Boys Club. They didn't

have much to say to Rocco, and he wondered uneasily just when they were going to stomp Rolf. Then one night he found out.

It was a Saturday, and there was a pretty good crowd in the joint. Rocco had told the girls to work a little stronger, and the customers appreciated it. He was in his office, reading a newspaper, when Stan came in. He had a suitcase with him. He asked Rocco if it would be okay to stash it for a few days.

"Sure," said Rocco. "Just set it over there in the corner".

"Ain't you got a closet or somethin' that locks up?"

There was a closet, where Rocco hung his coat, and it had a lock. He came around the desk and reached for the suitcase.

"Okay, I'll put it in the closet. What you got in there that's so valuable? Your dirty drawers?"

Stan didn't reply. He hesitated, then handed Rocco the suitcase. It was very heavy. No clothes in there.

Rocco put the suitcase up on his desk, walked abruptly over to the office door, and locked it. He said harshly, "Now what the hell you got in this bag, fella?"

"What you think I got? You outa your skull?"

The suitcase was locked. "Unlock it!" demanded Rocco.

"What's buggin' you?" grumbled Stan. "I don't wanna do that—"

Rocco yanked open a desk drawer and drew out a black .38 automatic and thrust it against Stan's navel. *"Unlock it!* I said."

Stan fumbled in his pocket for the key. "Mr. Borrio ain't gonna like this," he fumed.

He found the key and opened the suitcase. It contained a Thompson sub-machine gun, black and ugly and efficient-looking.

Rocco suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Nerves, he told himself. His hand shook as he closed the suitcase. He put the .38 back in the desk drawer. He had to pull himself together.

He laughed. "Pardon me, Stan, I got the boojums tonight. Don't know what the hell it is. Sure, stash it in the closet."

Stan shut the suitcase, put it in the back of the closet, and set the automatic lock on the door so that it caught.

Rocco had the bottle out. "Want a drink, Stan? I could use one."

Stan wore an injured air. "I could always use one. I never see a guy take the gas like you do."

Rocco dropped an ice cube in each glass and splashed in a little water from a decanter on his desk. He handed Stan his drink. "It's just that seein' that chopper goosed me a little. I thought it'd be ball bats or brass knucks or somethin' like that."

Stan took a long gulp of his drink. "This ain't no stomp," he

said, holding his glass up and studying it. "This is a hit."

Rocco's hands were shaking, but he tried not to let Stan see. He nodded. "It adds up. The guy is really building a fire under us. Got it set?"

"Mmm." Stan knew he wasn't supposed to lay it out, even for Rocco. He finished his drink and Rocco quickly poured him another.

"Good booze," said Stan. Well, what the hell, one more.

"You got a good book on this pigeon?" Rocco tried his best to sound casual.

"Enough." Stan laughed tolerantly. "You know that big hit in Cleveland? That guy in the barber chair? We got a book on that joker in just three days."

"Yeah, but that was different. Big gambler like that, he's on the town a lot. Not this jasper. Kids around him all the time."

Stan was working on his third double. He winked slyly. "He goes out all by his lonesome on his night off. To see his chick."

"I didn't know he had a chick!"

"If you can call a thirty-five year old broad a chick. Not too bad. We seen her one night. Names Keller—Anna Keller. Widow."

"Where does she live?" Rocco asked, lighting an Uppman. "Oh, pardon me, Stan. Have a cigar?"

Stan accepted an Uppman and puffed while Rocco worked the big silver desk-lighter. Stan was beginning to feel pretty good.

"That's a cigar," he said, puffing appreciatively.

"Upmann. Real Havana perfecto. You can't buy a better smoke."

"Yeah," said Stan. "I heard about 'em. You was askin' me where this old doll lives. One-family house on Oak Street, Oak Park."

"What night does he go out there?"

Maybe he was flapping too much. "Friday," he said. He got up, staggering a little. "Thanks for th' drinks, pal."

"Anytime, Stan." And then, as if it were an afterthought: "Say, when you want the chopper? This Friday?"

"Sunnay," said Stan thickly. "Almos' forgot. Sunnay afternoon."

"Sunday? I thought you said Friday."

"Gotta clean 'er, check 'er over." He smiled a maudlin smile.

"Sunday's tomorrow," said Rocco. "Okay. Take it easy, Stan."

He sat down weakly behind the desk. Friday, on Rolf's night off. They were going to tail him to Oak Park, and somewhere on the way they were going to kill him.

He had to see Johnny. It was the only chance. He phoned him. "Come down and have breakfast," said Johnny. "About eleven."

IV

JOHNNY BORRIO was sitting up in bed reading the Sunday papers. He was fifty-five years old, short and thin with a wizened gnome's face and a huge, hawk-like nose. His hair was black and combed back over a large bald spot. He was reading through bifocals, peering over the tops like a fussy little professor.

"Sit down, Rocco," he said. "Ed's fixing some eggs and sausage. That all right with you?"

"Eggs and sausage will be fine, Johnny."

Johnny threw aside the papers. "Ed's my new boy. A fine cook, Rocco. Dining car chef on the Burlington for twenty years."

Ed came in with two trays, each containing a heaping plate of scrambled eggs, several lengths of sausage, and a mound of delicately-browned rye toast. There was coffee on a serving cart, and a pitcher of orange juice. Ed was a white-polled, muscular Negro, about sixty-five.

They ate for a few minutes in silence. Then Johnny said, "I suppose you've come about Stan and Vito."

"Yes." Rocco put down his knife and fork. His hands were trembling. "Johnny, does it have to be this way?"

Johnny nodded. "I only carry out orders, Rocco. You know that."

"But it isn't right, Johnny, to hit a screwball like Knudson! A stomp would answer the same purpose!"

Johnny shook his head. "They considered the matter very carefully, Rocco. A stomp would not be enough. He would get over it, and then he would go down to Springfield with more public sympathy than ever. An example must be made of him, Rocco. Everybody must know that anybody who tries to hurt us is risking his life."

"But if he's hit, Johnny, won't that hurt us worse?"

"No. For awhile it will *seem* to. The papers, the Crime Commission, the politicians—they'll all scream their heads off. The ward will be shut down tighter than ever. Hitting Knudson will mean sacrificing the ward for a long time, but we can stand that. The politicians will get the message, and so will the cops. The message is: don't push! No farther than this, we will be saying, and they will understand."

There was a long silence. Rocco toyed with his coffee. He said, "I guess there's nothin' I can say."

"Nothing. Don't interfere, Rocco. You know what it would mean."

Rocco nodded. "I'm on the wrong team, Johnny."

"Shut up, Rocco! You're on the team that gave you everything you've got!"

"What does it give me now, Johnny? The blood of my friends?"

"Rocco, I order you to observe *omerta*! Shut up!"

"Thanks for the breakfast, Johnny. Thanks for everything."

Johnny Borrio watched him go. *"Buon' addio, ragazzo,"* he called after him. There was a note of sad affection in his voice.

Rocco had driven the Porsche down to Johnny's place, and now he drove slowly up to Roosevelt Road, thinking he might pick up Angie and ride out into the country somewhere. He'd told her they might do something like that. He wanted to get off and do some thinking, but he wanted somebody with him whom he could trust. And, he thought bitterly, the only person in the world he could trust was Angie.

Suddenly something hit him and just before he got to Halsted Street he pulled over to the curb to think about it. Stan had said that the hit was set for Friday night. But wait a damn minute. Friday was a funny night for Rolf to have off. It was the busiest night in the week at the Club because the punks didn't have to go to school the next day. And Stan wanted the Thompson gun that very afternoon—Sunday.

He parked, went into a drug store, and called the Boys Club. Some kid answered the phone. Rolf was around somewhere, the kid guessed. Hold the wire and he'd try to find him. Never mind, said Rocco. Did the kid happen to know what night Rolf had off? Sure, said the kid, everybody knew that. Tonight—Sunday. Thanks, said Rocco.

He didn't have much time but he suddenly felt better because he knew what to do. He even hummed a few bars of "Some Enchanted Evening" as he turned the Porsche north on Halsted street.

It was two o'clock when he reached the joint. He felt good. He didn't even need a drink. He had a few business details to attend to, and he attended to them. Then he brought the suitcase out of the closet and put it on the desk.

He opened the drawer and took out the .38 automatic, broke it open to make sure it was fully loaded, checked the safety, and stuck it in his belt. He put on a brown tweed sports jacket and buttoned it, so that the .38 didn't show.

The phone rang. It was Angie. "Hey boss," she said in her cute accent. "Me thought we go country."

"Somethin' came up," he said apologetically. "Sorry, Angie."

"Me more sorry," she said reproachfully. "Zee you later, boss?"

"Sure," he said. "Tonight, Angie."

"Goo bye, boss. Be good boy."

"Angie," he said on a sudden impulse. "I love you, Angie."

He heard her gasp happily and then he hung up.

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," he called. It was Stan and Vito. They were dressed in their sharp suits, and they were wearing floppy gray felt hats and pointed, shiny black shoes.

"Well, there she is." He pointed to the suitcase.

Stan grunted. He picked up the suitcase.

Rocco said, "I thought you wanted to clean it."

"Not here." Stan smiled. "In our car. We got the oil and the chamois an' stuff in the pocket."

"Oh!"

Rocco followed them to the door. They turned left and walked east towards the parking lot where they kept the Chrysler. Rocco walked rapidly west towards Halsted, hoping they wouldn't look back.

There was the usual softball game on the playground, but Rolf wasn't there. He was up in the little two-room apartment on the third floor where he lived, the boys said. Rocco went up and knocked on the door and a voice called out "Come in."

Rolf was in the bathroom, taking a shower. He stuck his wet blond head through the shower curtain.

"Why, hello," he said, mildly surprised. "Make yourself at home, Rock. Be with you in a minute."

"No hurry, old buddy." He flopped down in a battered easy chair and picked up a magazine. Just the kind of a magazine you would expect an egghead like Rolf to read. No pictures.

He heard the shower stop and in a minute Rolf came out in a bathrobe. He motioned towards a picture on the wall. "Take a look, Rock. I am almost certain you're in that one."

Rocco went over to the picture. It was a group photo of a basketball team; the wall was covered with pictures of various kinds of athletic teams. In one corner of the picture, so faded now as to be almost illegible, he could make out the words: NORTH AVENUE BOYS CLUB JUNIORS, 1927-1928.

There he was, second from the end in the first row, a skinny, dark, scared-looking kid in a white basketball suit and wearing big leather knee-guards. And there were the other dimly-remembered kids —Rolf, Karl, Lonnie, that big colored boy whose name he had forgotten—all of them.

He was surprised to see how much bigger and stronger Rolf looked in the picture than he did. They were about the same size now, but back then Rolf had been the strong one. Rolf had protected the skinny, runny-nosed lit-

tle *ragazzo* from Cambridge Avenue from the big boys then. Times change, Rocco thought grimly.

He laughed. "Well, I'll be damned! I'd forgotten all about that team. We were pretty good, huh?"

Rolf had gone into the bedroom. He called out, "I think we won the Junior Division that year."

"Thanks to you."

Rolf laughed. "It was good team play, Rock. You had a pretty hot set shot from the left side, as I recall."

"Come to think of it, I did." He was pleased that Rolf had remembered.

Rolf came out of the bedroom wearing a pair of neatly-pressed charcoal gray trousers and a light blue shirt. His hair was still wet from the shower.

"Look," he said apologetically, "I'd like to shoot the breeze with you, Rock, but I'm having supper with my girl."

"You got a girl?"

"Yes. Oh, I guess you don't know about that. I met her during the war, when we were both working with the Friends Service Committee. Her husband was killed in North Africa. Left her with a little boy. Her name's Anna Keller and she lives in Oak Park."

"You must be givin' her quite a rush."

"It's more than that, Rock. We're going to be married. Week from today, to be exact. Right here at the Club, and you're invited."

Rocco was touched. "You really mean it? You want me?"

"Sure we want you. Aren't you an old friend? Come up and eat with me some night this week, Rock. I'm very good on the spam and spuds."

"Yeah, thanks, if I can get free. I'll call you. Love that spam."

Rolf had finished dressing now. "Look, Rock, was there something special you wanted to see me about? I hate to run like this, but Anna expects me at seven and the traffic on Chicago Avenue is rough."

"It can wait."

"You're welcome to hang around here. There's stuff in the refrigerator."

He was putting on the trenchcoat and the battered brown felt hat that he had been wearing the night he had come to the Lounge. It was the only coat he had, Rocco guessed. Stan and Vito must have seen him lots of time in that coat and hat.

"No," he said. "I'll go out with you."

"Well, suit yourself." Rolf snapped the automatic lock on the door and held it open.

"After you," said Rocco politely, smiling a little.

"Thanks." Rolf grinned and took a step towards the door.

Rocco jerked the automatic out

of his belt and brought it down hard on the side of Rolf's head. It opened an ugly gash and the blood welled out and ran swiftly down to the corner of his mouth and then to the collar of the blue shirt. He staggered but didn't go down, and he raised a shaking hand to the cut and looked at Rocco with dumb, hurt eyes.

Rocco raised the automatic and brought it down again, and then again. Finally Rolf went down, slumping in an unconscious heap, eyes glazed, his face in a pool of blood and a crimson trickle running from his nose and one corner of his mouth.

Rocco rolled him over and yanked the trench-coat off him. He loosened his shirt-collar, put a pillow under his head, and wrapped a wet towel around the wounds. Then he put on the trench-coat, pulled up the collar to half conceal his face, and jammed the blood-stained brown hat on his head. The keys to the Plymouth were in the trench-coat pocket. He broke open the automatic again to check it and put it in the right-hand pocket of the trench-coat.

He looked carefully up and down the hall. Nobody in sight. The voices of the softball players floated up from the playground; otherwise the Club was wrapped in late Sunday afternoon silence. He walked carefully down the back stairs to the alley door, opened the door, and looked out.

The alley was deserted. He stepped quickly into the black Plymouth and stuck a key into the ignition. It didn't fit. He tried another. It turned and the motor sputtered fitfully but finally caught. Still nobody in sight. Oh, that damned special gear-shift! But in a few seconds he got the hang of it. The alley was a one-way street, so he had no choice of direction. He drove slowly down the alley to Halsted Street, and turned south.

V

THEY PICKED HIM up as soon as he came out of the alley.

The gray Chrysler kept about half a block behind him all the way down Halsted. Through the rear-view mirror he could see the two figures in the floppy gray hats sitting in the front seat, and he knew the Thompson gun was on the seat between them. He took the automatic out of the pocket of the trench-coat and laid it on the seat beside him.

He turned right on to Chicago Avenue. The Chrysler turned right, staying about three cars behind. He wondered where they figured to make the hit. For blocks now they would be going through an industrial area, factories and warehouses and railroad tracks, and no houses at all. Most of the traffic was headed east, back into

the city. He drove with one hand, the other resting lightly on the automatic.

There was only one car between him and the Chrysler now. His grip tightened on the automatic. His heart was pounding and he could feel the throbbing of the great vein in his throat. His hands were wet with sweat, and sweat was running down his face.

Suddenly he gunned the Plymouth and it groaned but responded. He cut out and passed two cars and then cut in again. The Chrysler followed and then cut in only one car back.

He knew the plan. They would keep that one car between them until they were ready. Then they would shoot out, pass it, pull even with him, and blast.

Goddam them, he thought. They won't get handed nothin'. He put his foot down hard on the gas, shot past the car ahead, and got the Plymouth up to seventy. There were no cars for several blocks now, and the factories and warehouses, silent and deserted, flashed past on his right.

He saw the Chrysler cut out and burn after him. When they caught up, that would be it. Vito was driving; in the rear-view mirror he saw Stan roll down the front window and rest the ugly snout of the Thompson gun on the bottom of the open window.

The Chrysler cut to the outside lane to pull even with him, and he suddenly took his foot off the gas and braked down. He was trembling, but he had to laugh. The Chrysler shot ahead of him, and he caught a glimpse of the astonished faces of Stan and Vito, Stan all set to let him have it, and then barreling past without getting a chance to shoot.

Rocco had the trench-coat pulled up around his face and the hat down over his eyes and he was hunched down in the seat to make the smallest possible target. He was sure they hadn't recognized him.

He made a screaming right hand turn into a rutted dirt street between two factory buildings. The Chrysler had made a U-turn and was gunning back up Chicago Avenue, ignoring the indignant shrilling of a dozen horns. It cut across the west-bound traffic into the dirt street to the accompaniment of a cacophony of indignant horns.

Two hundred yards ahead of him loomed a high wire fence, and, behind it, a factory building. A dead-end street! The story of my life, he thought. They were almost on him again and he had to choose between smashing into the fence or slowing down and letting them take him.

The Chrysler was just behind him and a little to the left, coming up on the outside, and he saw the flame jet from the small, round ugly mouth of the Thomp-

son gun, and suddenly there was a row of neat holes in the Plymouth's windshield and he felt a slug rip into his shoulder and a streak of pain flash along the side of his head and the warm, salty blood gush down into his right eye and his mouth, closing the eye.

He braked, stalling the motor, and the Chrysler roared by, the Thompson gun spitting, stitching another line of holes in the door and hood of the Plymouth, and he knew that he had been hit again in the gut, the thigh, the foot. And now the Chrysler was screaming to a stop in front of the wire fence and turning back down the middle of the road for another pass at him.

He could hardly see because of the blood in his eyes and he could feel the life running out of him, but they hadn't stopped him yet. He got the Plymouth started again and drove it with his right hand while he shifted the automatic to his left and aimed it at the Chrysler careening down the road towards him. The two cars raced towards each other in the middle of the rutted street, the automatic and the Thompson both spitting fire. Then he saw the holes blossom in the windshield of the Chrysler and the crimson bloom spread across Stan's square face as the Thompson gun fell into the road.

He saw Vito twist the wheel frantically to escape the onrushing Plymouth and with the last of his strength he twisted to meet it. And the last thing he saw in this world was the dark, rat-like, terror-stricken face of Vito coming through the Chrysler's wind-

shield with hunks of glass and strips of bloody flesh hanging grotesquely from it as the two cars came together with a roar that shattered the Sunday stillness and brought cars and men surging in from Chicago Avenue.

They could not get him out and he was still alive when the ambulance got there, and a priest came with the ambulance. Although he could not speak, he managed to make the sign of the Cross, and the priest gave him absolution and extreme unction, and he died with the trace of a smile on his blood-caked, smashed face, although he knew that he had bought Rolf only a little time.

A Fire Department rescue truck finally came and they cut him out of the wreckage with acetylene torches, but he was dead by then. They took him to the Cook County morgue, where he was identified by his driver's license. The morning edition of the *Tribune* had a black headline the length of its front page: THREE DIE IN GANG GUN BATTLE...

The funeral was held at the Church of St. Philip Benizi, in the old neighborhood, and white-haired Father Verochi, who had known him as an altar-boy, said the Mass.

"He did not live well," Father Verochi told the handful of mourners, "but he died well."

During the funeral it began to rain. Since only members of the immediate family were to attend the service at the grave, Rolf and Anna Keller and Angie Lopez went back to Rolf's apartment in the Boys Club.

Anna made coffee on the little two-burner hot plate, and they were drinking coffee and looking out the window at the gray spring rain slanting down softly as the funeral cortege came up Halsted Street on its way to Calvary Cemetery.

Angie was sobbing quietly to herself.

Rolf knew that Rocco had paid for only a little time, but he said nothing of this to the others. As the flower-banked black hearse passed in the street below, he raised his coffee cup in a kind of a salute.

"Thanks, Rock," he said softly to himself. "I'll be seeing you."

A New MIKE SHAYNE Novelet Next Month

A SINGLE FOE

A new writer . . . and the most frightening story of teen-age violence you'll ever read

by FRANK CRISMON

HE KNEW THEM, those he pursued. He didn't need the car radio descriptions. Yet he listened anyway to the hourly breaks in the disc-jockey rattle, because they fed his hate and drive, and made

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them as hot as the scorched wind coming in from the desert.

The road stretched like pulled gum over the oven-hot sand. The steering wheel in his hands burned and the road behind that he saw in the mirror lay gray and empty in the sun. That was good. He wanted to find them first, before the police or other searchers, rightfully outraged, angered upon them.

But he wasn't concerned for all three. Not Doc Lannon or Rudy Myers. No—the other pursuers could have those two. But Willy Sloan . . . Willy he wanted. That face with dirty freckles, that mouth always loose with noise, the eyes heavy-lidded with leer. Oh, he knew the face! How well he knew it!

The music on the radio stopped. He listened to national reports and then finally heard:

"Police report that the three teenage killers—Gerald Lannon, Rudy Myers, and William Sloan—are still at large on their statewide gun-spree of terror that began last Thursday afternoon with the shooting of Hazel Ryan, wife of a Washington High School teacher. For the past two days, these three sixteen-year-olds have been the objects of a statewide search in an effort to end the rampage resulting thus far in four other deaths."

The same, he thought. For the past two hours, no change. Three members of a farm family killed. An unidentified hitchhiker falling across the highway with only enough life remaining to tell of three denim-jacketed boys.

And of course Hazel . . .

What next? Had they slowed, found surfeit, or were they just now in random search of some other victim? Oh, the power that was theirs—gloating, exultant—life or death of any chance individual encountered.

For a moment memories flooded strong, but he pushed them away—thoughts of the early scout trip, of crowded history classes. Of Hazel . . . the few whispered words that choked from dying lips . . . the body that was soulless flesh in his arms . . .

He would find him. He swore before heaven and earth and hell that he would find Willy Sloan, the murderer of his wife.

Carl had been searching since the police sent him home last Thursday night. In spite of their warnings: *I hope you use some caution, Mr. Ryan. Don't do anything drastic. Let us handle it. Those boys have marked themselves now.* But he hadn't wanted advice. He wanted to bear his malice like the suffering of boils so he could feel the relief when it was gone.

So it was that now, two days later, car loaded with camping supplies, he saw Las Flores ahead, straddling the highway. He knew what was there. It was all a part of

his reckoning, for soon the trio would have to seek sanctuary from their notoriety.

I know just the place to hide, he could hear Willy saying. *Won't nobody look for us there.*

But Las Flores was not the place. It was only a gathering of dead wood in which a few scummy windows peered out on the highway that swept through. He pulled up to a teetering building that had EL CHARRO in faded letters across a warped screendoor. His eyes felt grainy and raw, for he'd had no sleep since Thursday, except those two hours when he'd pulled off the road the night before.

He took his thermos inside. "Fill it with coffee, please," he said to the perspiring, sullen-faced man, standing behind the counter. When the man returned with the warm thermos, Carl asked, "Had any kids in here?"

"Don't no kids come in here. This here is a dead place."

He paid the man and drained the ice water in the glass that had been put before him. He felt suddenly tired. Maybe the exhaustion was catching up with him. To keep the tight spring-coil of intention that made him immune to weariness he must move and keep moving.

He shoved out into the blinding sun. When he opened the car door he heard it, a popping sound and little more, for the desert with the mountains too distant for echo was wide and absorbed the sound instantly.

His heart pole-vaulted, but he saw no one, heard nothing. He shook his head. Maybe a car. He was starting to imagine things. Soon every man would resemble Willy; any cough a shot. The gravel sprayed from under his tires as he swung his car on the steaming pavement.

At the edge of town he looked in at the small service station where he had stopped on the scout trip four years ago, the pick-up full of shouting boys. Memories suddenly retreated. That car by the gas pump. He touched his brakes. In the back of his mind, his hand tightening on the wheel, he could see it again in a different place—back at the high school in the student parking area . . . gray coupe . . . white pin stripes. He could hear the raucous laugh over illicit cigarettes. Noisy pipes.

A car from behind whipped about him with a crazy-damn-fool blare of the horn. *Don't do anything drastic,* the policeman had said. But he couldn't think of danger now. They could be watching him at this moment if they were here, and he had made no mistake about the car. So dirty were the windows glaring in the sun, he could see nothing inside.

He turned off the road in front of the coupe; the dust and hot air settled about him. What mocking eyes watched him? As he dashed

for the corner of the station, he could sense an elbowed nudge and breathless snicker: *Mr. Ryan—Beaky Ryan's playing detective.*

This was better. Catching his breath against the splintered wall, he felt less vulnerable. A mesquite camouflaged him on his right and he was out of the glare of the wide-eyed windows. The heat fired against his skin, and his body streamed with sweat. Only his mouth was dry. His lips felt ready to crack.

Shall we wait till he comes inside—old Beaky? Or shall one of us sneak up from behind?

He wiped his forehead with his bare wrist and then dragged his hand across his khaki pants. Perhaps there was a back door.

In spite of his efforts, rocks slipped and ground noisily under his shoes. He heard the waspish sound of another car streak past on the highway and then the wide desert hush. At the back corner he halted once more. He saw no one. The desert chopped and heaved to the pale mountains in silence. He saw a rear door, and swallowing on nothing, crept up the steps.

The door opened with no protest of sound, as he slipped into stuffy darkness smelling of gasoline.

"Hello, *Mis*ter Ryan."

The voice he recognized before he turned to the dirty freckles. The insinuation in it he understood before he saw the gun in the splotched and red-haired hand.

"If you'll go right through the door there," said Willy, "there'll be two more favorites of yours. Home times."

More angry than afraid, he preceded Willy into the other room. The windows opened out on the highway that looked smokey through the grime that was not cleaned off them.

"You found our guest?" said Doc, staring at him through wire-rimmed glasses that rested on his thin nose and enlarged his eyes into expressionless pennies. "We can have a regular reunion now—Greeks and Romans and all that jazz."

Then he saw the service station attendant leaning against the wall. His young face looked like an old sheet of paper, and he held his arm at the shoulder. Blood dripped from his fingers off bright winding trails.

"Please, mister, do you know them? Cause if you do—"

"Oh, we know each other," said Doc with a high giggle. He held a knife in his hand. He was seldom without his knife.

Then Rudy came in from outside, tiny and thin and trivial looking. "So he come in the back after all."

"I never thought we'd have such a visitor," said Doc.

"You ever seen a man shot dead, Mister Ryan?" said Willy.

The attendant opened his eyes. His face glistened with sweat. "Please— "

"Have you, Mister Ryan?"

He stared at Willy, trying to reconstruct in his mind the big frame house outside town, the old Ryan home belonging to the only Ryan child. Hazel answering the knock . . . Or had they knocked?

"Answer me, Mister Ryan. I bet you never seen a man shot. You think you're a big boy and you ain't never seen a man shot dead."

The attendant shook his head, tears making many streams on his face. "Please—please—!" A single strand of damp black hair fell over his forehead. His face demolished itself in terror, his chest choked with sobs.

Suddenly Carl saw Hazel's face, masked with the same terror. "No! No!" he yelled.

But his cry was useless, drowned by the thunder of the shot. For a moment everything was quiet.

"Let's get out," said Willy.

They shoved him ahead out the door. He stumbled in the gravel.

"We'll take Beaky's car," said Willy. And to Rudy, "You follow us in the coupe and we'll ditch it after we turn off."

Doc drove, excited eyes peering across the sun glare on the hood, as Carl sat with Willy in back, sat before the borehole of the gun.

"What's the matter? You look kind of pale and sick, Mister Ryan."

Carl trembled, but he didn't answer. He glanced back at the gray coupe that followed. In numbers they ran undefeated. He had only one chance. He must get Willy alone.

They streaked down the highway to the base of the mountains where Willy said, "Turn here, Doc."

The car wheeled on to a desert road, hiding the gray coupe in a lather of dust. Carl wiped his face and pulled at his shirt that was wet against his hot skin. He had been right. Willy did know a good place to hide.

"You remember that boy scout trip we come here on that time, Mister Ryan?"

"I remember a good many things being stolen."

"Nobody could prove who did it."

"But a lot of us had ideas."

Willy smiled. "They was just a bunch of squares."

Ahead the road began to climb the perilous length of Regina Hill which in a few winding miles would take them out of the desert heat into the smell and coolness of green pines. When he climbed the hill four years ago with the pickup load of boys, he had been fresh from college, an idealistic scoutmaster. *Everybody's got it in for Willy,* he'd said. *Give him a chance.*

The thought of the words brought an angry taste. Willy was bad. Something inside was decayed and rotten, and must have always been there.

When they finally reached the wide section in trail that was the lookout point, they pulled off and waited for the coupe they could see on the curves below. Farther down yet the desert stretched like a long floor, hidden partly by the dusty atmosphere. Cactus were pin-pricks, Las Flores almost lost in the sunken distance.

Willy motioned Carl out of the car. Doc's eyes brightened behind the windows of his lenses.

"Take off your shoes," Willy said.

He stared his puzzlement a moment, but the gun was held impersonally in the freckled hand. He bent over and unlaced his shoes and stood on the rough dirt in his socks.

"Now put your socks in your shoes."

He did as he was told.

Then Willy picked them up, and glancing at him, hurled them stiff-armed over the ledge. They faded to specks and sank like lazy birds, but he never heard them land.

"I don't think you'll be walking far now, Mister Ryan. Do you?"

At that moment Rudy pulled in behind, his pointed nose barely cresting the dash. The radiator steamed from the climb.

"Turn it back down the road," Willy told him. "Give me your belt, Mister Ryan."

He unbuckled it and handed it to Willy, who latched the steering wheel to the door handle. Then with Willy spurting directions, he helped Doc and Rudy shove the car, small rocks cutting at his bare feet. It swerved down the slope and hurtled off the edge in a suspension of silence. He heard it bounce, crashing and crumbling from ledge to ledge, its sound fading until it dropped in stomach-emptying softness on the desert floor.

"That old car wasn't good for much," said Willy, laughing a noisy laugh. "I'm sure glad we run into you, Mister Ryan. And besides you ain't gonna be needing your car, are you?"

THE OLD CAMP site was fallen and overgrown from four years of solitude. Floors upon which tents had been erected were rugged over with pine needles; the roof of the bunkhouse was crushed by a limb fallen from one of the huge pines above it. Only the camp office was still usable.

Doc and Rudy jerked on the boards covering the door. Inside the tables and cot frames rested under a powder of dust that their footsteps stirred to motion.

"Does it bring back memories, Mister Ryan?" said Willy. Five or six times during the two week en-

campment four years ago, Willy had stood in this building—now empty and full of shadows—before the camp master.

Willy stood on a chair and kicked loose the boards that covered one of the windows. "Pick them up, Mister Ryan. They'll make good firewood."

By the time he had the fire going, night had come under the pine trees. The air had cooled and he shivered slightly. He hadn't much time, he thought, looking at the bubbling coffee pot. They'd soon grow tired of the game they played with him.

The three of them sat near the campfire watching him as he kneeled beside it. And Willy grinned. The smile that Hazel must have seen . . . As the fire built up, the shadows played over Willy's face and body, painting out the corrupt freckles and hiding the eyes in dark coves. Carl sat back, a wild plan in mind. Dangerous but he'd have to chance it. He had no choice.

He could hear the moan high in the pines where the wind went through and the soft crackle of the campfire. He remembered how he and Hazel had gone camping so often. Remember! Would he ever be able to forget it? Would he ever be able to forget the wet rug under Hazel's body and the shock of the neighbors gathered about and the still flesh that responded to nothing or no one twenty minutes later when Dr. Mangum and the ambulance arrived?

"Hey, isn't the coffee ready?" yelled Willy.

He would never be able to forget it. He would make certain he never did.

"Give us some coffee, Mister Ryan."

Carl gripped the handle of the coffeepot with his handkerchief and stood. He feared his intention showed in his face. Shadows wove and retreated over the dark trees as the fire flickered. The pine needles cooled under his feet as he moved from the fire toward Willy. Doc and Ruddy held out their cups, but he went beyond them. Willy—his enemy, his foe. *He* had the revolver. The handle of the pot burned through his handkerchief. The pot trembled in his fist as he waited.

Moving the gun from right hand to left, Willy held out his cup. "This here is pretty good service, ain't it?" He lowered the revolver a little as he leaned around him to see Rudy. "Hot coffee. . . . Hey, that's enough."

But Carl poured. Faster. More.

"That's enough!"

The handle scalded his fingers now. He chewed his lip in pain. It was time. In one motion, with one thought, a single reflex, he turned the whole thing upside down.

Willy yelled, doubled over, as Carl sprang into darkness, crush-

ing a pine cone under his bare foot. He dived into a bush. Thorns ripped at him, tore his shirt. He rolled, heedless of the noise he made, on through the brush, and found himself in total blackness. Comforting blackness. He lay still, catching his breath till his eye could work better in the darkness. He sucked his burned fingers, felt the blood on his face from the gashing of the thorns. He wiped it away.

About the campfire the three yelled—Willy in pain, the other two in apparent confusion. Quickly before they collected themselves, Carl moved farther into the darkness. His hand came to a wall. One of the old buildings. Three pine trunks partially hid the glow of the fire, dying now.

"Go find him!" Willy shouted. "Go find him! I'll kill him"

Rudy and Doc slipped into the shadows on opposite sides of the campfire, Rudy toward the road, Doc in his direction, showing in the last glint of flame the blade of his knife.

Ducking, hands nearly brushing the ground, Carl rushed to the black shadow of a wide pine trunk. He listened. No sound. But the knife was out there—somewhere. Doc creeping. Alert. But he couldn't wait. He started forward. He tripped. He swore to himself as he fell, crashing through brush to the ground.

"What was that? Did you find him?" Willy's voice was tight with rage.

Carl felt about him, found the piece of wood he'd tripped on, and stood again. Through the trees, he saw Willy brandishing the revolver at the darkness. Willy called again, but neither Doc nor Rudy answered.

Carl snaked over the needles, gripping the wood. He must get away from this spot before he was found. He crawled on. Then, safely distant, he lay quietly and looked back. Wait now for Doc. See what he would do. Whether he'd come toward the noise . . . Minutes seemed long. Or was it more than one? The delay irritated him. At the moment only Doc kept him from Willy, and nothing else mattered but that splotched and leering face. If he could get to the car . . . Doc had the keys, of course, but that didn't matter.

He started at a sudden sound.

It was Doc. He was coming, almost noiselessly, only the whisper of a footstep. But Carl recognized the shadow against the dim fire. Carefully he raised himself. He had the wood—this against the shining knife. The slow figure came closer. He let it come near, very near. Then he rose and hurled the wood.

Confusion. Doc fell. Struggled to rise, fell again. Carl was there. His hand raised and a quick chop on the back of the neck . . .

Now! Doc breathed hoarsely against the pine needles at his feet. He wouldn't be any bother for awhile. Now Willy, he thought. Now Willy. He ran quickly through the darkness toward the car.

"What happened? Why don't you guys answer?"

Willy whirled in the pale firelight. "Doc? Rudy? Where are you?"

Then Carl was beside the car, standing in the dim glow. He reached inside, hugging the door for protection. He trembled with tension. Then he called.

Willy whirled and the beam of the headlights hit him. He raised his arm against the glare, ducked his head. The gun fell. Carl ran, his eyes, mind, his whole heart, body, and soul on the small dark object lying near the rim of darkness. He lunged, but Willy recovered. Hands grabbed an ankle and he fell.

He kicked back with his bare foot, but fingers would not release his knee. His own fingers scraped pine needles, damp underneath, and he clawed toward the weapon. But another weight held him back.

He turned on his side and lifting his free leg drove his foot into the rising face before him, pushing into the ground with his other leg, now free, to scoot on his back toward the blackness outside the circle. And then flopping over on his belly he found the gun beneath his hand. He whirled on Willy.

The face shrank back like someone withdrawing from a frightening mystery.

Carl rose. Now! Now! He was victor over Willy Sloan

Quickly, before Doc recovered. Before Rudy returned.

He stared at Willy, panting, pulse throbbing. The gun inclined in his hand and all he need do was squeeze a fist and Hazel would be

avenged. The debt demanded that —vengeance—to himself, to the horror he had endured, the emptiness he must still endure, until he rested in his grave at her side.

But Willy's mouth puckered as though he were going to spit. "Go ahead, Beaky—*Mister* Ryan."

The firelight flickered and the pine trees reared salient shadows about him and he thought of Hazel—not the lifeless form on the floor, but the one that his mind could resurrect in wonderful memory. Then his senses focused on the face and saw again and remembered the leer in the eyes, the raucous voice, and brutal killer mind. It couldn't be. Whatever the cause, however irrevocable, he didn't belong to that lost, despised and despising world.

Even the jeer of curled lips—"No guts, Beaky?"—and the laugh and the memory of a limp body and oaths of vengeance—those things could not change him, make him different from the person Hazel had known him to be. He couldn't make Willy endure the pain, endure the anguish that brought the rock-sized sob to the throat. He detested Willy for making him weak this way.

"She flunked me twice," Willy mouthed. "She got what was coming to her—that teacher wife of yours."

Choking, Carl snatched one of the sticks of wood. "Murderer," he said, advancing. "Murderer." He raised his arm and struck the freckled head. Willy cried and ducked.

He hurled his arm again, feeling the thud on the hunched back go up in his wrist. Tears came to his eyes and he swore at the dark figure curled at his feet, using words that he could not find enough of, sobbing them over and over until his muscles went flaccid and he sagged, trembling, and finally backed away on heavy feet.

"Sit up," he said at last.

The figure did not move.

He dropped the stick on the fire. His hand began to burn again.

He heard a small whimpering. The body lifted. Across Willy's face was a long red smear. A small trail ran from his nose and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

At that moment Rudy dashed into the pale circle of light. Too tired to talk, Carl motioned him with the revolver toward Willy. He appeared cowed without the might of weapon to bolster him. Doc could wait.

Then Carl heard a car in the distance, winding up the mountainside. He wasn't surprised. Probably the police had kept tab on him. It seemed somehow very natural that he should have help now, when it was no longer important to him. But he thought no longer about it. He only stood there. And waited.

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DEATH RIDES a CAMEL

It had all the earmarks of a brutal slaying

. . . by an animal famous in circus legend.

But Costello held a lawyer's brief for camels.

by ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

THE THREE TALL, humped camels continued to stare over the heads of the two men, chewing their cuds after the manner of their kind. They were seemingly unaware of the presence of mere human beings close to them. The dim lights made them look like prehistoric monsters. It emphasized their alienness, their strange angles and fantastic shapes, giving them an almost sinister aspect.

A lion roared somberly across the tent, and a chill little wind fluttered the dirty canvas of the menagerie.

"Camels," the big man declared, "ain't lethal! They're onery, I admit. Worst disposition of any critter on earth. Snappish and troublesome. But not really dangerous like a lion, or tiger. They'll kick you, or bite you, if you anger them. But they won't actually kill you. Leastways, I never heard of one doin' it!"

"Well, it can't be news to you, Mr. Costello," the circus owner said. "My partner was killed by those camels only ten days ago. You must have read about it. The story was printed in *Amusement Business* and *Variety*, along with his obituary and most of the regular newspapers carried it as a novelty."

The big man nodded heavily. "Oh, sure, I read it, Mr. Henley. Only I didn't believe it. That's why I came here, to check on it. All the way from California. You know who I am, of course?" he added, casually.

Jess Henley stared up at him. Costello was a huge man, almost seven feet tall, and very fat, bulg-

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ing in every direction. His face was as ancient and wrinkled as an old Indian's, and he had snow-white hair. But his pale blue eyes were curiously youthful and he carried himself with the easy confidence of youth. His attire was flamboyant, to say the least.

Costello's checked suit, gaudy vest, and tiger-claw watch chain made him seem like a showman from another age who had strayed by accident into the present and might put on a ghostly disappearing act at any moment, if his realness should be doubted. But it was hard to doubt the realness of Bull Costello.

"Oh, yes indeed," Henley assured him. "Everybody in Outdoor Show Business has heard of the great 'Bull' Costello! You were the best circus cop in the game, back in the days when tent shows were big enough to carry their own Lot Police. You were with all the important outfits, Sells-Floto, Hagenbeck Wallace, Barnes, even the 'Big One' at its peak. And you sure built up a name. You're almost a legend. But that was all a long time ago. I assumed you'd retired nowadays, like most of the old-timers."

"Oh, I have!" Costello assured him, blithely. "I been off th' road for years! Last time out was with th' Cole show in—lessee—must have been nineteen fifty. I been livin' out on th' West Coast since then, never expect to troupe again. Circuses are all on trucks these days and they're too small. No fun at all for a guy like me.

"But I still do a special job now an' then for tent shows—just to keep my hand in. That's why I was so long gettin' here, matter of fact. I started out right away, in my car. Drove her to Ohio in three days. But I passed a carnival upstate, an' they was havin' a little trouble, an' hired me to investigate it. They offered more than I could turn down. I figured th' job would take about two days, an' pay my expenses for th' trip. But it took me a whole week to find out who was stealin' from their office."

Jess Henley glanced at him admiringly. "Well, you're certainly spry for your age, I'll say that for you! And still capable, too, obviously. But I don't understand why you were so interested in Roy Sunnyvales' death. Were you a friend of his?"

"Nope. Never laid eyes on him in my life. Oh, I know th' name, of course! Been Sunnyvales in circus business for almost a hundred years. Half a dozen of 'em owned their own shows. But young Roy was th' last of his line, an' since my time. We never met. It was th' camel angle that attracted me. Animals are my hobby. That's how I got my nickname, you know—'cause you could always find me 'round th' 'Bull line' in th' menagerie.

"So I just had to come check on

it," Costello went on, after a pause. "I thought maybe th' story was mixed up—papers get things wrong, you know. I thought maybe it was some other kind of beast. Of course, any animal can be a man-killer, at least in theory. But Lordy! camels have been considered harmless on circuses for almost two hundred years! I must have trouped with a thousand of 'em in my time an' not one ever hurt nobody. We had real herds in my day—not just three, like you got. Every big outfit carried fifteen er twenty head. Ringlin' show had forty for years!"

Henley looked a bit embarrassed. "Yes, but you've got to remember that in those days you could buy a camel for a hundred dollars. I paid twenty-seven hundred a piece for two of mine. Quite a difference. A lot of truck shows don't carry even one nowadays. Even Ringling doesn't have any now. This 'herd's' one of the largest on the road. The third camel didn't cost me anything. He's the calf of the other two, born last year. But there's a good ten thousand dollars on the hoof, in that bunch!"

Costello whistled softly. "Do tell! Everything's sure went up! It's a nice herd. I wasn't criticisin' it. An' they're big Bactrians; double-humpers, too. Scarcer than dromedaries—an' a lot tougher! But, just the same, I can't believe that they would kill a man!"

He reached out his hand, as if to stroke the neck of the nearest one. Instantly, an ugly triangular head swung around, and evil eyes glared at him. There was the vicious snap of jaws. Only the fact that the brute was wearing a leather muzzle saved Costello's fingers.

"There, you see?" the owner said, triumphantly. "They're vicious enough."

Costello shrugged. "Hell, that don't mean nothin'," he grunted. "They bite, sure! I been bit by 'em, all over th' United States an' Canada. Kicked, too, an' spit upon—spittin's their main weepon. They ain't lovable critters, I admit. But they don't kill men."

Henley sighed. "Well, I'm afraid there's no doubt they killed poor Roy. I saw it with my own eyes."

The big man stared. "You saw it happen?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way. If anyone had been around, Roy might have been rescued. But I saw his body, as soon as they found it the next morning. There was no doubt what had happened to him. He was actually lying under the camels and one of them was still pawing at him. There were hoof-marks all over his clothing, even camel-slobber. He'd obviously been trampled. His neck was broken, chest caved in, head crushed and half the bones in his body cracked. Looked like he'd been mauled by

an elephant! But the bulls were tethered outside, they couldn't have had anything to do with it. We called the police, of course."

Costello rubbed his chin. "Does sound convincin', I admit. But how come nobody was around, to see it? You leave your menagerie empty an' unguarded at night? Lordy, in my day they'd have been eighteen or twenty keepers sleepin' around in th' straw."

Again the younger man sighed. "Sure. But our menagerie isn't that big, as you can see! We don't need a large animal crew. We've got one Bull Man, two Cage Men, and one Led Stock Boy. That's the lot. One of 'em usually sleeps with the beasts, if we lay over overnight. They take turns. The Bull Man was on duty that night, but he slept out in the Bull Truck, with his charges. We usually tie them outside on warm nights, because they like it better than the tent.

"The other men got back around midnight—drunk, most likely—and turned in on the straw without noticing anything. The tent was dark, and the animals quiet. The night watchman hadn't reported any runkus, and it was only when it began to get light that the boy noticed the camels were pawing over something he thought was a sack.

"He went over to take it away from 'em and yelled the alarm! I was in here, from my trailer, in two minutes. But it was too late to do anything for Roy, of course. He'd been dead for hours—body was stiff. So he must have been killed between the night show, and midnight. Show closed down about ten thirty."

"Uh huh. Happened 'round eleven, then, at a guess. But what on earth was your pardner doin', hangin' around th' Camel Line at that hour of night? Don't make sense."

Henley smiled sadly. "Oh, that's no mystery, if you knew Roy. He was always hanging around those camels. He had a sort of fixation on them. The whole show knew about it. You see, when we first bought the older pair, they were trained. They did an act. Roy worked them in the ring for over a year."

Costello raised his eyebrows. "Performin' ones, huh? Well, well. That's a rarity in this country, these days. Only act like that I know of is Jack Joyce's. It should have been an attraction. But how come the owner of th' show was workin' acts, like a hired hand?"

"Oh, Roy was the saving kind. That's why he was such a good partner. It was cheaper than hiring a trainer. We started small, and had to save our dough. And you know those Sunnyvales. They could do anything around a circus. Roy was a good animal trainer. He'd even handled lions, and

elephants. But the camel act started to fall off, after a while, and I finally persuaded him to drop it."

"You mean th' brutes tried to attack him?"

"No, nothing like that. They'd just balk, stall, and refuse tricks. It was slowing the whole program down. And we didn't need it any more. We could afford plenty of other acts by that time. And Roy certainly had enough to do running the show. So we dropped it, this season, and just let the beasts stand in the menagerie.

"But it seemed to prey on Roy's mind. He took it as a personal failure. He was always hanging around them, in his spare time; studying them, talking to them, trying to find out what had gone wrong with them. Once or twice he even took them in the ring. But it was no use. They were as bad as ever."

"Hmm. Don't suppose he could have roughed 'em up that night, do you? Knockin' 'em around, or something'? That could have made 'em attack him."

"Oh, no. Roy wasn't that sort. He was the gentlest trainer I ever saw work. Too gentle, in my opinion. That was the trouble. Camels are tough customers. You have to be rough with 'em at times."

"Yeah, you can say that again!" Costello rubbed his bruised fingers, feelingly. "But I still don't understand. If he'd been their trainer, if they knowed him, even if they didn't like him—well, it just don't seem reasonable that they'd have attacked him. Especially if they was tied up to their pickets. Don't make sense to me at all."

The circus owner shrugged. "Who can say what goes on in the minds of animals? But there's no question that they *did* do it. If you have any doubts, you can drive back to Masillon, where it happened. You can see the records of the case, the coroner's verdict, autopsy report, even some photos they took of the body. They all fix the blame squarely on the camels."

"Wouldn't convince me!" Costello shook his head." If there's one thing my experience has taught me it's that town cops are plumb ignorant, about animals, especially circus animals. They'd swallow anything. Tell 'em a rhesus monkey killed a man, they'd believe it. No, I'd have to see th' body for myself."

"Sorry. You're too late. It was buried over a week ago. We shipped Roy back to his home town in Texas. He had relatives there, and a fianceé. They took care of the funeral. I wanted to go out for it myself; but—" Henley spread his hands—"somebody had to stay, and run the show!"

"Uh huh. But how can you be sure that th' camels done it?"

"But, damn it, man, there's no other explanation."

"Oh, sure there is." Costello looked at him. "It could have been—murder."

There was a long silence. The lion across the tent roared again, an ominous sound. Henley was staring at Costello his face gone pale.

"Are you serious?" he said, after a little.

" 'Course I am. It could have been done easy. Somebody could have bumped him off, dragged th' body in here, and shoved it under th' herd, figurin' they'd get th' blame for it. It's an old dodge—been done before. I ran across it a coupla times in my day. Never with camels, I admit."

"My God! Nobody ever even thought of that! But who'd want to do a thing like that to Roy Sunnyvale? He didn't have any enemies. Everybody liked him. In fact, he was the most popular man on the show."

"We-e-ell," Costello rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. "It's been my experience that a man can't be owner of a show without makin' enemies. I never got up near that high myself, but I sure made plenty! Twenty guys would be tickled to death to knock me off, if they could pass it as an accident, an' get off scott-free. For that matter, it wouldn't have to be an enemy. Just somebody who'd profit by his death."

"But who would profit by it?"

"Oh, somebody might. For instance, who gets his share of the show?"

"No one." Henley shook his head. "Roy was just a working partner. He didn't actually own anything. The outfit's mine, lock, stock and barrel. I put up all the money. Roy just contributed his name, and his services, and took a share of the profits. It's a common working arrangement; you know that. My name, Tess Henley, doesn't mean anything to the public. I'm a good manager. I managed a couple of other Truck Shows before I started my own. But it was the name Sunnyvale on the trucks, that pulled in the audiences. It's the best-known circus family in the Middle West."

"Yeah, I know. Too bad it's gone. Roy was th' last of th' line."

"Yes. He was a fine showman, too. And it was mighty handy, having a young man around. I don't know where I'll find another partner to replace him. His death was a great loss to me, and to the whole troupe. And a gain to nobody, as far as I can see."

"Well, you can't tell." Costello shook his head, stubbornly. "Did he have any big debts or owe money?"

"Lord, no! The circus was making money, hand over fist. Neither of us owed anyone a cent. We were getting rich."

"How about woman scrapes?

They can get a man killed sometimes."

"No, nothing of that sort at all. It's funny. I hesitated before I took him into partnership, because I'd heard he was a chaser. But he certainly wasn't. He was around here for two seasons, and never looked at a dame! We all kidded him about it. Being big and handsome, women swarmed around him. But he never gave any of 'em a tumble. Seemed interested only in his work, and the show.

"Oh, he'd date one or two of the single women on the troupe now and then. But never anything serious. And, a few weeks ago, he got engaged to a girl in his home town, where his family always wintered. She was coming on the show, next month, to marry him. Instead, she got his body back to bury! Hell of a thing! Poor kid, I sure feel sorry for her, even though I never met her."

"Uh huh." Costello shrugged. "Well, we all have to die sometime. Feller gets my age, he quits sympathizin' so much. Not much point, when you know you're next. Only question is, did he die natural, or did somebody maybe give him a push?"

He stared up at the three camels for a moment. They looked blandly over his head, munching in the detached way that all camels have.

"There's one way to find out for sure if they done it, you know." he said, softly.

"How's that?"

"Why, give 'em a chance to do it again. They will, you know. If they've really gone bad, it's only a question of time before they kill someone else. Well, I'll give 'em a crack at me. I'll sleep in th' tent beside 'em the next couple of nights. Then I'll tell you for certain if they're murderers."

Henley gaped. "Good Lord! You'd take a risk like that?"

"Sure, why not? I've took lots worse risks, in my time. Like I said, I'm an animal nut. Got a bump of curiosity about 'em a mile high. I didn't drive clear cross th' country, just to look at them camels. I want to see 'em in action. Be something' to tell about, later. I'll take my chances."

"No, no." Henley shook his head. "Nice of you to offer, but I couldn't give you permission. It would be too risky! You might get hurt, or even killed. Then the show would be held responsible."

"Nope, it won't!" Costello reached into his capacious inner pocket, and pulled out a legal-looking document. "I thought of that and took care of it before I left. Had my lawyer draw up a regular release form. Says I'm doin' th' whole thing on my own, an' waives all claims. It'll stand up in any court. You can have your legal adjuster look it over, if

you doubt it. He'll tell you it's fool-proof."

Henley accepted the paper, his face clearing. "Well, if you're willing to stick your neck out that far I'd be a damn fool not to take you up on it! I admit I'd like to know the answer myself! I don't want to go on hauling these brutes around if they're really murderous. We've taken every precaution, put muzzles on 'em, used chains instead of picket ropes, and so on. They've brought in quite a lot of business. With all the publicity, crowds have been coming to see the killer herd. But if they're really killers, Id get rid of them fast. It would be my duty as a citizen. If you can help me get at the truth, I'll pay you anything within reason."

"Oh, I don't want a cent." Costello waved his hand, magnanimously. "I just want to satisfy my own curiosity. Like I said, I'm an animal nut."

"But you'll be taking a terrible risk!"

"Don't worry, I ain't takin' any real chance. I'm warned, in advance. They won't catch me th' way they did your partner. I ain't goin' to get close enough to 'em. Just near enough to tempt 'em. An' I won't really be sleepin', I'll do my sleepin' daytimes, uptown in a hotel room. I'll just lay here, in th' straw all night. It'll be like a stakeout in my police days. If one of 'em so much as makes a move toward me, I'll be up, an' out of range in a second. What th' hell, they're tied. They can't chase me! An' I'll have my cane, an' a gun on my hip. Can't see I'm runnin' much risk. Certainly not as much as I've done with human criminals, in th' past!"

"Very well, it's up to you. The whole show will co-operate. Just tell us what you want us to do."

"Well, you'll have to spread the word around to your whole troupe. Tell everybody what I'm goin' to do, an' why I'm doin' it. I don't want nobody comin' near th' Animal Top. I've got to be absolutely alone, like Roy Sunnyvale was, or it won't be a test. And send your whole animal crew uptown. Don't worry about your stock. I'll keep an eye on them. I'm an old hand, around menageries!"

"But don't you want the men to stand by, outside, in case of emergency?"

"Hell, no! I don't even want them on th' lot. Animals got senses we ain't. They'll know if anybody's around, an' won't try nothin'. This has got to be under absolute test conditions, or it won't prove a thing."

"Okay. It's a bargain." Henley held out his hand. "And you're a brave man, Mr. Costello!"

"Nope, just an old one. An' with nothin' to do these days, but satisfy curiosity. I'll duck uptown now, rent me a hotel room, an' grab a few hours sleep, so's to be

ready. But I'll be back around eight. I want to catch your performance. I ain't seen it yet. I never missed a circus, in my whole life!"

IT WAS AROUND eleven that evening. The night show was over, the crowd straggling out onto the darkening midway, where the Side Show and Pit Shows were making their last pitch, amid much blare and ballyhoo. Lights were going out over the ticket trailers, and concession stands were closing down. Jess Henley, sitting in his owner's chair in the Markee, spotted the Garguantuan figure of Bull Costello looming among the patrons, and waved him over.

"Well, are you still going through with it?" he asked.

"Oh, sure!" Mack Costello was munching the remains of a popcorn brick. On his hard face was now the beatific grin of a small boy who had never quite grown up. "I'm just waitin' until th' menagerie's empty, the crew goes off duty, an' th' lights go out. Then I'll take over."

He sank into a chair, and wheezed. "Them camels is kneelin' at their pickets, peaceful as lambs. Sure don't look frightenin' to me."

"Well, they probably killed a man," Henley reminded him, grimly. "Just take care they don't kill another!"

"Uh huh." Costello chuckled. "Be funny if this was my last night on earth, wouldn't it? Still, can't think of no place I'd rather spend it than on a circus. Thing I always loved best."

"How did you like the show?" Henley queried.

"Oh, not too bad! Awful small, of course, by my standards. Just can't get used to th' way circuses are shrinkin' up, nowadays when everything else is gettin' bigger. No openin' special, no hippodrome races, only a four piece band—wouldn't have drawn flies in my day.

"But I guess this new generation, that never saw the real ones, enjoy it. You pulled a full house. Do that th' next four shows, an' Akron will be a banner stand. Some of your youngsters in there got real talent. Like you said, your gals are awful pretty. An' one or two of your acts are Big Time. That gal on th' high rope, for instance. Oh, she ain't no Lilly Leitzel or Irma Ward. Ain't got their technique. But she can sure do one-arm planges."

"La Belle Moira? Yes, she's been our star for two seasons now. European import. She was on the Ringling show. Would you like to meet her? She asked to meet you. She was most interested when she heard about you, and what you're doing. You might want to talk to her. She was a friend of Roy's, one of the few he dated. She

could tell more about him than I can."

"Sure, sure!" Costello beamed, straightening his necktie. Always glad to talk to a woman as good lookin' as she is. About all I can do is talk to 'em these days!

"Good. I'll introduce you. Here she is now—oh, Moira!" Henley stood up.

The woman walking out through the turnstiles halted, smiling. A reddish blonde, apparently in her early thirties, wearing a blue sweater and skirt and no hat, and carrying a plastic overnight bag. She was superbly built, and walked with an acrobat's grace. Her smile was dazzling.

"This is the man I was telling you about," Henley said. "Mr. Costello, this is Moira Marlene."

Off came Costello's white Stetson in a gallant sweep. "Delighted to meet you, Miss Moira," he rumbled. "I was just tellin' your boss here how much I liked your work in th' Ring, tonight. 'You're easy th' best act he's got!"

"Thank you." She dimpled. "And you are the great 'Bull' Costello, of whom one has heard so much." She turned to Henley, with a mock-frown. "But why did you not tell me that he was so handsome, and distinguished-looking? I was expecting a much older man."

Costello flushed with pleasure. "Aw now, ma'am," he protested. "You hadn't ought to say such things. It's too flatterin' to an ol' codger. It has been a long time since anybody called me handsome. Fat's th' word they generally use!"

"Oh, nonsense!" she said. "You are perfectly proportioned, for your great height. You would have made a striking figure, in the Ring!"

The woman linked her arm through Costello's. "Would you care to buy a gal a cup of coffee?" she said. "I was on my way uptown to my hotel. The show provides me with a suite, when we stay more than one day in a town. But I can spare a few moments, if you can."

"Why, certainly." Costello beamed, flattered. He glanced back through the striped menagerie entrance." There's still a few customers hangin' around, in there; crew ain't even started to put th' boards up on th' animal dens. I got plenty of time! Come on, that coffee and doughnut stand near the Kid Show still has its lights on."

He escorted her proudly across the Midway. She clung to his arm, leaning against him, and smiling in a way that would have turned a far younger man's head.

"Two coffees," he said to the counter man.

Costello seated his guest on one of the rickety portable stools, but, after a dubious glance at them, remained standing himself.

"Nice of you to waste time on an old codger like me, Miss Moira," he said.

She rolled her eyes up at him, coquettishly. "Why do you so persistently low-rate yourself?" she asked. "You are not old—just in the prime of life! Still strong and active, and so brave. I think it is wonderful, what you are doing. The moment I heard of it, I knew I must meet you. Not a man on the troupe would have the courage to take such a risk. Though I confess I do not see the point of it. Surely there is no doubt as to what happened to Roy Sunnyvale?"

The coffee came; they sipped it. "You think th' camels done it, huh?" Costello asked.

"Why, certainly. I did not see his body, but they told me. Nasty, vicious brutes! European circuses do not have such monsters. I could never understand why Roy was so fascinated by them."

"You know him well?"

"Oh, casually. I went out with him a few times, after the show, and he visited in my trailer. I liked him. But it was not serious, you understand? Nothing romantic. We were just friends. He was engaged to some girl in his home town—perhaps you heard? And anyhow, he was too young—not my type. Me, I have always been attracted to more mature men, such as yourself!"

She leaned heavily against him, and her hand caressed his fingers, on the coffee cup. Her touch was electric. "I am sure we could be very good friends."

Costello blushed. "Well, that's nice of you. I'm goin' to be around a couple of days. Maybe we'll see more of each other."

"Oh, we shall! I promise you that." She finished her coffee, and stood up. "And now, I am sorry, but I must be getting uptown. I shall see you in the morning, perhaps? And do take care of yourself. I should not want anything to happen to you."

"Oh, don't you worry about me!"

He accompanied her gallantly to the edge of the lot, held the door open for her as she got into her roadster, and stood watching as she drove away with a smile

and wave of her hand. Then he strolled back across the Midway, swinging his cane jauntily.

"Well, well," he muttered. "Who'd have thought I'd be a lady-killer again, at my time of life?"

The lights on the lot were almost all out now, the last patron departed. Even the Markee was dark, the turnstiles closed; he had to duck under them. Beyond, the menagerie tent was in total darkness, a place of strange sounds, and weird moving shadows.

From the shuttered cages came low snarls and hisses, and now and then a deep bass growl. The Elephant Line, at the far end, was just a rocking mass of alien dinosaur-shapes. The camels, nearest at hand, were still kneeling at their pickets, but all of them were awake. They were weaving their snake-like necks about, and making bubbling noises. They seemed curiously restless.

The animal crew had already cleared out. Only the Led Stock Boy, a faint shadow in the blackness, was still spreading fresh straw in a pile a few feet from his charges. He glanced up curiously as the big man approached.

"Best I can do for you, Mister!" he said. "Boss's orders. You sure got more guts than I have. I wouldn't sleep there for a million dollars. I lay clear over on the other side of the top, when I have to."

"You think they done it, too, do you?" Costello asked.

"Oh, sure, no question of it! I saw Mister Roy's body. I never heard of nothin' like it, before, I admit. But they've gone bad, that's all there is to it. I'm gonna quit this job, if Mister Jess don't get rid of 'em. I carry a piece of lead pipe when I work around 'em now. Scared all the time."

He finished his task, and picked up his jacket and cap. "Sure you don't want me to stick around, just in case?"

"Nope! I'll take over. You go on uptown, an' have fun. See you tomorrow."

"Hope so," the boy said, in a tone that implied he had no confidence in it. He slid out under the sidewall, and was gone.

Left all alone, Mack Costello remained immersed in thought. Then, squaring his shoulders, he walked over to the straw mound, took off his coat, rolled it into a pillow, lay down on it, pushed his hat over his eyes, gripped his cane tightly, and lay still. Silence descended.

It was only then that he began to realize that something was terribly wrong!

PAIN . . . SHOUTS . . . voices . . . flashing lights that kaleidoscoped, and gradually merged into vision . . . a splitting agony in his head that would not go away. He swayed dazedly and struggled to

a sitting position. "Wha-what happened?" he managed to gasp.

A firm hand was laid on his chest, pushing him back. "Lie down," a strange voice commanded. "Don't move till I finish bandaging your head. I'm the circus doctor. You got a bad rap; possibly a concussion."

"It's okay, Bull," Jess Henley's voice added. "Just lie quiet; take it easy. You're in my living-trailer, on my bed. We carried you in here when we found you. Lucky for you I disregarded your order, and looked in on you, from time to time. Or you'd have been killed, too. As it is, you've only got a few bruises.

"But the one you really want to thank," Henley went on, "is Moira, here. When I came in last all three of the brutes had you down, and were jumping on you. She was trying to fight them off, with a tent stake."

"I called for help. But no one came," a woman's voice chimed in. "I had to do something. It was horrible. All of them attacking him. I could not stay in my hotel. I had to come back, and see what was happening."

"We had to shoot that big buck camel," Henley went on. "Only way we could get you out from under him, even though he was chained—"

"You did?" Costello sat up, dizzily. "Aw, shucks, you shouldn't have done that. You're out twenty seven hundred bucks, not to mention a perfectly good camel. The poor critter didn't have a thing to do with it."

They stared at him. "What are you talking about?" Henley rapped. "You must be still dazed. We all saw what happened. You proved the camels were killers. You proved they killed my partner, Roy."

"Naw, I didn't." Costello stood up, reeling. He glared at them, red-eyed, under his bandages. "I proved what I come all this way to prove. The beasts were perfectly innocent. They didn't have anythin' to do with it. I proved that Roy Sunnyvale was murdered in cold blood—beaten to death with an iron tent stake. And—"

He hesitated, his manner changed. "I'm afraid I proved who his killer was. I got all the evidence I need for conviction."

Nobody said anything. They just stared, open-mouthed. Costello dominated them. "How did I get under the camels, to be trompled?" his great voice rumbled on. "I was lyin' a dozen feet away from 'em. And they was chained. They couldn't reach me. They sure didn't come over, pick me up, an' carry me back there.

"No more'n they hit me over th' head to knock me out, or slipped me knockout drops in my coffee, so I'd be helpless. Just pump my stomach out, Doc, or give me a blood test. You'll find

all the evidence you need . . . Grab her, somebody! Don't let her get away."

La Belle Moira had whirled, and was running swiftly toward the trailer door. Jess Henley put out a hand to block her, but she bowled him over. He crashed into a small table. Two or three canvasmen, peering in outside, tried to get in her way. But she burst through them like a football tackler, and raced off into the darkness.

"Oh, let her go." Costello sank back wearily onto the bunk. "She can't get far. The Akron police got a cordon around this lot; they've had it since you closed down tonight. That's what I was doin' uptown, arrangin' for it ahead of sleepin'. I got friends on the Akron force from the old days. They'll pick up anybody tryin' to leave. That was the best I could tell 'em. Didn't have no idea who was guilty at that time."

Costello grinned sheepishly at Jess Henley. "One I suspected most was you. You had the best motives. But I was absolutely sure it was somebody on th' show."

He sighed, heavily. "Whole thing was just a dodge, to smoke a murderer out. I never had th' slightest interest in them camels. I knew they was innocent. Sure, it's an Oriental superstition that death rides a black camel. But it sure couldn't be a circus camel. They're harmless as rabbits. But I knew if I pretended to be testin' 'em out th' real killer'd have to try to make it look deadly, or risk havin' th' first murder opened up.

"I didn't even notice the animals. I was just lyin' there waitin' for a human killer. I'd no idea who'd show up. But I was certain someone would. I was all set to grab 'em. And had th' cops planted outside in case I missed. Perfect set-up. I didn't see how it could fail. 'Course, I didn't know th' killer had already slipped me knockout drops, and that I'd be out like a light when she come back to pull th' job."

Costello's big hand patted his head. "Reason Moira got away with it was—I never thought of it bein' a woman. I was lookin' for a man; an' a strong man. It just wasn't what you'd call a woman's crime. But I guess there ain't no such thing, if you come right down to it. They ain't no different from us in their natures. Only reason they'll shoot you, or stab you, or poison you, instead of beatin' you to death with a club, is because most of 'em ain't got th' muscles.

"But a woman aerielist, doin' one-arm planges for a livin'—she's got 'em, all right. Lilly Leitzel, who done th' same act, could actually bend ten-penny nails around her fingers, an' make rings out of 'em for her friends. Ever see a man who could do that? I never did."

Costello nodded. "There's a lot more evidence, the police can dig up. She and Roy must have been livin' together in secret all this time. Thing like that couldn't happen in Rail Show days. On a train, everybody knows who is sleepin' with who. But with a Truck Show, with trailers scattered around on th' road half th' time, motels, and what not—it's simple. I'll bet you don't know half what's goin' on in your own show. I suspected somethin' like that when you told me Roy wasn't chasin', because I knew about his reputation, too. I figured he must have a dame stashed away somewhere.

"He was tryin' to get loose from Moira. That's why he cooked up that scheme of marryin' a gal in his home town. He figured she couldn't do a thing about that. Instead, he signed his death warrant. She had it all planned. She come up behind him, in th' menagerie, when he was visitin' the camels, like he often did, hit him over th' head, then beat him to death an' shoved his body under th' herd, figurin' they'd be blamed for it.

"Wouldn't have fooled nobody in my day. If they'd trompled a man, every critter in that tent would have been carryin' on like crazy. Roarin', trumpetin', bellerin' fit to wake up everybody on th' lot. For animals don't pay no attention what humans do unless they're trained to stay alert. They wouldn't even notice it.

"Moira used an iron tent stake. One of them old truck gear shafts all tent shows use nowadays. In my time, we had big wooden ones. They wouldn't make a mark much like a camel's hoof. But these got rounded ends about the same size. And of course, th' brutes made real tracks on him too; she seen to that. That's what she was doin' when you thought she was fightin' 'em off me. She was actually chasin' 'em back and forth over what she thought was my dead body, to cover up her handiwork. I ain't blamin' you fellers. It was dark in the tent top an' she's a slick explainer. But I bet it's th' first time two guys actually seen a murder bein' committed, an' didn't realize what they was seein'. You had her then, an' didn't know it. Afraid you wouldn't make very good detectives." He chuckled, grinning broadly.

"Moira didn't have to hit me, you know," Costello went on. "I was already out. But she wanted it realistic. She didn't care if she killed another man, or not. Only reason I'm still around, is because of that cowboy hat I was wearin'. I wear straw hats mostly; I ain't gone Western, like most Californians. But this was special. I had its' crown stuffed full of newspaper, an' strips of felt. Regular helmet! Knowin' Sunnyvale's head was

crushed, I just wasn't takin' no chances.

That dame was plumb ruthless! Shucks, she even stuck around, after she found out I was still alive. She thought she could brazen it out. She'd made a big play for me, an' figured I was so much under her spell, I'd swallow th' whole thing. I might have at that, if I hadn't knowed th' symptoms of them drops. I been fed 'em, before; most cops have. Never forgot the shock when I felt 'em comin' on. Whole crime was clear, in that moment. An' it sure was a nasty feelin', layin' there unable to move or speak. But what th' heck! Everything come out all right."

He stood up and stretched. "Well, guess I'll mosey on up to th' Police Station, an' get my stomach pumped out legal, for evidence. An' make an affidavit for her trial. I'll testify, too, if I have to. Guess you gents will, too. Even so, I doubt they'll hang her. Good lookin' woman—crime of passion—any jury'd let her off with only a few years. Probably kill another boy friend before she dies. She's that kind. But that's out of my hands. I proved it was a crime, an' I found out who done it.' That's about as much as one man could do. Especially an old, retired codger like me.

"Yes, but damn it," Jess Henley exploded. "That's the part I don't get. Why'd you do all this? You didn't get anything out of it. And coming all this way—what are you, that goes about avenging murders, for nothing? Why'd you care what happened to Roy? You said yourself you'd never even met him."

"Uh huh." The big man eyed him, enigmatically. "That's what I said. An' it's true. I never laid eyes on him. But I sure didn't say I didn't know his family! Matter of fact, his father, Bill Sunnyvale, was one of th' best friends I ever had. Him an' me trouped together, on half a dozen shows. Lifelong buddies we were. He saved my life, once. Of course, he's been dead for years. But that don't cancel a debt like that. Not with me, it don't.

"Him an' his kid never got along—on account of Roy's woman ways, I gather. The old man was kind of strait-laced. So they never visited on shows, an' I never got to meet Roy. But of course, all bets are off when your only son gets murdered. Minute I read that story, I knew what had really happened. That camel story was plain silly. An' I knew old Bill wouldn't rest easy in his grave, with his son's killer gettin' off free. He'd expect me to do somethin' about it. So I did, an' I ain't sorry. What th' heck—all I got are a few bruises that will heal quick. An' I paid off a debt I been owin' for twenty years. Fair enough deal, I'd say. I'm satisfied.

"Only regret I got," he said, as he lingered, in the doorway, "is that poor old camel you shot. Camels sure ain't my favorite animals. But it don't seem right he'd get bumped off, when he was perfectly innocent. Still, he was gettin' old, an' crochety. I guess maybe he's better off, out of his troubles." Costello heaved a sigh. "Maybe it'd be kinder if they'd shoot all old humans, too, before they got useless, an' past their time, like me."

He sighed and fell silent.

"Yes, you're certainly useless!" Henley snorted, with irony. "God! If I thought you'd take it, I'd offer you a partnership in Roy's place. You're the most efficient guy I ever met, of any age! Be worth your weight in gold. I still think you ought to at least take a fee for your trouble. Just name it, I'll pay anything within reason. It'll be worth it, many times over, for what you did for me, and my late partner."

Costello shook his head firmly. "Nope, I can't take your money. Wouldn't be fair. I didn't do it, for you. I done it for th' memory of an old friend. An' I hope he knows it, wherever he is.

"And anyway, I already paid my expenses, from that Carny job. An' I got paid, in another way." A curious look came over his face. "A beautiful woman made a play for me; told me I was wonderful, that she could go for me. Been a long time since anything like that happened to me. Never thought it would again.

"Of course, it was just a phony—but then, it'd have to be at my age. But it was a nice feelin', all th' same. Man don't get a kick out of it, he'd have to be dead. An' I ain't yet, quite—S'long!"

He lumbered out the door, and the darkness swallowed him up.

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Dark on Monday

An Irish dancer who looked Chinese, a locust plague of threatening letters, and a brutal murder . . . made Noon a Monday worrier.

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

A RINGING PHONE in the hours before dawn can't exactly be classified as social. Anything that can't wait until morning has to be pretty urgent by any man's standards. Nobody invites you to a wedding or a ball game in the small hours. So when the black beetle on my desk in the mouse auditorium woke me up out of a dead sleep on the office couch, the clammy hand of emergency closed over my brain. It's never a nice feeling even if you have lots of money in the bank. Worried, I fumbled for the phone.

"Noon here," I said. "Midnight everywhere else."

"Ed Noon, the detective?"

I was wide awake now, looking for a cigarette. "If this is the Fred Astaire Dance Studio telling me I've won a free lesson—"

"Don't joke, please," a hysterical feminine voice pleaded. "There just isn't any time to waste. Can you meet me at the corner of Forty Fifth and Ninth?"

"What did you have in mind, lady? Somebody to tell your troubles to over a cup of coffee?"

"Mr. Noon—" The voice got

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A

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NOON

NOVELET

hold of itself. "My name is Peggy Potter. I'm not drunk. Or silly. I need you. Can you meet me in twenty minutes? I know it's late but it's worth one hundred dollars to me."

I stalled. "Twenty minutes—"

"Please, Mr. Noon. This is a matter of life and death."

"Sure it is, Miss Potter," I agreed with all my early morning amiability. "But don't you think you could—"

She had already thought. "Oh, I know you're angry with me. But please come. I can explain it all then. But not now."

"Do you have the hundred on you?"

"Yes."

"Twenty minutes, Miss Potter," I said. "Forty Fifth and Ninth."

Sleep was out of the question now but the money wasn't. I was dressed and walking down Ninth Avenue ten minutes later. My office was no more than ten blocks away from Peggy Potter's rendezvous point. I had the fog and the alley cats for company.

There was an all-night cafeteria on the corner of Forty Fifth and Ninth. A greasy spoon. I remembered it well. The coffee was unauthorized poison and anything fried was courting ptomaine. I looked through the big glass window.

A girl was sitting on the first stool by the deserted cash register gazing anxiously back at me. Her eyebrows arched questioningly. I shrugged and walked in.

A lone counterman at the far end of the place was frying himself a pair of eggs. He mumbled to himself when he saw me. I shook him off and he went back to the eggs happily. I could see the place was doing an overflow business. I and the girl had it all to ourselves. I sat down on the stool next to her.

"I'm Peggy Potter," she said. It was the same voice I had heard on the phone.

"You're Chinese," I said.

She was. A small, shapely body not exactly hidden in Capri slacks and a cashmere sweater was topped by a Susie Wong face complete with the legendary skin and slanted eyes.

The slant-eyes widened. "Does that make a difference?"

"It does," I admitted. "I don't want to run into a Tong War at three-thirty in the morning."

She leaned in toward me, her Oriental-styled hair as black as raven's wings. "Relax, please," she said. "Until today I never thought of China. Now, I don't know. It's all so crazy. But you have to help me."

"Whoa, I'm here. Now explain. Don't start with riddles. Let's begin where you called me in the middle of the night and said you were in trouble."

"But I am."

"I know who you are. I don't know what your trouble is."

"Mr. Noon, I'm a dancer, in the chorus of *Dragon Time*. I have a feature. I'm the girl who does the solo at the beginning of the second act."

My memory stirred. *Dragon Time* was the newest Broadway hit. It was a lively musical with brash songs and a one-joke plot. But the critics had received it warmly because it was Oriental and different. I vaguely remembered the entertainment section of the *New York Times* and a full page of high-powered advertising. I hadn't seen the show yet but the name of Peggy Potter didn't mean a thing to me.

"Congratulations," I said. "You'll be working for years according to the reviews."

Peggy Potter smiled what they call the inscrutable smile. But there was nothing inscrutable about Peggy Potter. She had the galloping willies. It worried me, because I had the feeling she might start screaming any minute.

"It's my dance that's caused all the trouble, Mr. Noon. Somebody out front doesn't like it."

"Who?"

"I don't know." She rustled around in a tiny black handbag. "But look at this. I get one every evening without fail."

I took the letter she handed me. It was no more than a 5x8 scrap of paper with heavy red lines on it. The message was short and to the point:

If you dare to perform that indecent dance again, I shall fix it so you never dance again. You are a disgrace to Free China.

Mr. Theda

I looked up from the curious mail to find Peggy Potter's worried eyes staring into mine. I smiled.

"The message is the same every time?"

She nodded.

"When did you start getting them?"

She thought a minute. The expression of concentration made her face beautiful. "This is the fifth one. They began coming in —Wednesday. It's always the same. I get to my dressing room and I usually find a note like this somewhere in the room. On my bureau, or pinned to the wall where I get my messages. Once, I found it rolled up in my cold cream jar." She shuddered. "It's terrible. Knowing whoever it is can come and go as they please."

"Do you know anybody named Theda?"

She shook her Oriental-styled hairdo at me. "No. I've never known anybody by that name."

"You wouldn't either. It's an anagram on the word Death. See? Twist the letters around. T-H-E-D-A. D-E-A-T-H. Somebody is playing games. Theda Bara, the old movie vamp, was a mystic. That's how she picked her first name. She was convinced she'd die at an early age."

I folded the letter and gave it back to her. "It's a crank letter maybe. Maybe not. Why didn't you report this to the police?"

I could see her gulp. "I was afraid you'd ask me that."

"You have to answer if you want me to help you."

Her eyes searched mine. I began to realize they were not as slanted as her eyebrow make-up suggested.

"Can I trust you?"

I showed her my teeth. "That's a silly question, Peggy."

Her pink tongue moistened her lower lip. But her eyes raced quickly around the cafeteria. We were still alone. The counterman was wolfing his eggs at the other end of the cafeteria. He was five tables away and out of earshot.

"You had to be Chinese to get into *Dragon Time.*" Peggy Potter sighed. "I lied to Equity. Show Business isn't tough enough. But the producer of the show, Jim Wing, insisted on an all Chinese cast. I've been a specialty dancer mostly. This was my big break. It's a solo with fans and Chinese lanterns. I stop the show with it. But I couldn't have gotten into the show without saying I was Chinese."

"Potter?" I raised my eyebrows.

"That's just it," she bubbled. "I told casting I had an Irish father and a Chinese mother. They went for it. I'm not billed as Potter. They call me Peggy Loy. When you see me up close, you can see I'm pretty thinned-out stock. Well, if I went to the cops, the truth would come out."

"What truth?"

"I'm as Irish as corn beef and cabbage. I just happened to be born with almond shaped eyes."

I smiled. "I'll buy that for now. What's your family history? And does anybody else in the cast know that Peggy Loy is as Irish as corn beef and cabbage?"

"Oh—I see what you mean. No, most of the kids are from San Francisco and New York's Chinatown. They're all Americanized. But Chinese, of course. I'm sure of that. You think somebody in the show is doing this?"

I shrugged. "Show people are notoriously jealous. And it sounds like an inside job."

She shuddered again. "I'm from Pittsburgh. Left home three years ago. Knocked around the circuit playing clubs and things. My name was Baxter then. I had a bad marriage. He died in a car accident. I've got no living relatives. Don't really know anyone here in town. I don't even have a roommate."

"No men?"

"No men." Her tone was suddenly weary. "When you're devoted to dancing, you save your body for it. Men can only ruin a thing like that."

It was too early in the morning for lectures.

"This is tough, Peggy. Not easy at all. What do you want me to do?"

"Protect me. I got your name from the doorman of the St. James. He said you were a fine private detective. Can't you do something about these letters? I'm going out of my mind."

I held my hand out. "Okay. Give me the hundred and then I'll take you home. Can you get a front seat for *Dragon Time?*"

She nodded, puzzled.

"I'll give you one of my house seats. They allow two to the featured performers. You have an idea?"

"Yeah," I said. "Your letter writer may be some nut who thinks girls shouldn't undress on stage. Or show too much flesh. I may catch him at tomorrow's performance. You can't tell. Then after the show I'll go backstage and we'll see if you got another letter."

Her face clouded. "It can't be tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"We're dark on Monday. Closed. It'll have to be Tuesday night."

"Tuesday it is," I said getting up from the hot stool. She was pressing a crisp one hundred dollar bill into my hand. She still looked worried.

"Take it easy, Peggy," I said. "It's always darkest before the dawn."

Her smile was oblique as she left some change on the counter. "The man who thought that up probably had a good night's sleep once in awhile."

She was right.

I took her home in a cab. To an apartment house on West Sixty-ninth Street. I got her safely inside her home, checked the closets and under the beds for hiding crackpots and then said goodnight. The latch clicked behind me. I rode back to the auditorium trying to think about Mr. Theda and his poison pen. But I really couldn't do a thing until Tuesday.

Which was terrible figuring on my part.

Peggy Potter was right about Monday. It *was* dark. She never saw the light of Tuesday morning.

II

THE PHONE RANG about ten o'clock the next morning. I was shaved, fed and relaxed, reading the thick pile of the Sunday sections of the *Times*.

It was Monks on the phone. Captain Mike Monks of Homicide. I got unrelaxed in a hurry.

"Do you know a Chinese showgirl named Peggy Potter?"

"Yes and I'd like to know her better. Why?"

Monks sighed. "Found your name and number on a scrap of paper in her handbag. She's lying on the floor of her bedroom on West Sixty-ninth. It's pretty ugly,

Ed. She's not only been stabbed but some maniac hacked her legs with the knife, and made it one of those gruesome cases that can still make me feel like an over-sensitive rookie."

"Is she—?"

"Yes, Ed. Very. Better hurry up."

I hung up and cursed into next year and the one after that. I knew why I cursed. I hate murder but I hate erring detectives a lot more. I was there in twenty-two minutes.

Monks listened patiently to what few details I had while he brewed some coffee in the tiny kitchenette. Past his broad shoulders, the body under the sheet in the bedroom haunted my brain. I turned away, ignoring the clamor that Monks' men sent up as they worried the room with powders and flashlight pictures.

Peggy Potter had died in bed. She must have liked to sleep in the nude. The clothes she had been wearing in the early morning hours were neatly hung in the bedroom closet. Only her bra and panties were lying on the chair by the big bed. The killer had slain with a Jack-The-Ripper brutality. He had stabbed her with a large kitchen knife which Monks had found in the bathroom lying under a running faucet of water.

But this Jack had not been content with merely murder. He had slashed Peggy Potter's dancing legs at least thirty or forty times. Silently I hoped it had happened after the heart thrust. But knowing maniacs, I doubted it.

"Here," Monks grunted, his thick hand forcing a cup of coffee on me. "Drink this. You look kinda pale. Stop blaming yourself. She should have come to us with her troubles. We've got the organization. What have you got?"

"A hundred dollars of her money. Blood money now."

"Knock it off, Ed. That's not like you. So she hides in a Chinese show and is spotted by somebody she gave the air to. That's all it is. This killer's a nut. But he must have had an axe to grind."

"You think that's what it is? A disappointed lover?"

"You want to make more of it?"

"What about the Free China business that's always mentioned in the letters?"

Monks sipped his coffee. "We only have her word and yours for that. We didn't find any letters. Not here or in her dressing room at the theatre. Besides, even if the letters existed, it's only a cover-up for a killer. He didn't want her knowing just who he was, did he?"

I shook my head. "Mike, this crank business has been explored by psychologists since the beginning of time. A crank writes a letter to worry, to bother, to disturb even someone he doesn't know. That's where all the screwball fun

lies. But a person who is out for vengeance, like a brushed-off lover as you seem to think this killer might be, only writes letters because he hasn't got the guts to follow through.

"But part of his peculiar fun is that the recipient of the letter knows who's writing them. See what I mean? No. I talked to Peggy. This is no brushed-off boyfriend from the past. This is a real nut out for kicks his own way. Some maniac on the loose somewhere."

Monks scowled. "What makes you so sure?"

I smiled thinly. "You free tomorrow night?"

"That depends on what you have in mind, Ed," Monks said. "I can't go to any ball games."

His eyes widened as I held up two Front Row seat tickets which I had found tucked on the dresser mirror of Peggy Potter's bureau.

"This is business, Mike," I said.

He frowned. "How is seeing the show she was in going to help us solve her murder?"

"That, Michael, remains to be seen."

I stared at the white-sheeted body in the bedroom. "I owe it to the lady to do everything I can to track him down."

III

TUESDAY NIGHT was brighter than a skyfull of rockets. West Forty-fourth Street shone like a Christmas tree. At the theatre hour, Monks and I stood under the marquee, unobtrusively mixed with the horde of playgoers, smoking our cigarettes and indolently surveying the world at large. For all eyes to see, we were simply a pair of associates taking in the magic of *Dragon Time,* New York's newest hit show.

Monks rumbled as jostling passersby collided with his bulk. I restrained a laugh. Dressed for playgoing, the Captain of Homicide cut a figure that his subordinates would have goggled at.

"You can't arrest a murderer in those clothes," I suggested, taking in his blue fedora and matching blue dress suit. "You look like something out of *Guys And Dolls.*"

"Sue me, Mr. Noon. What's a better cover-up for a detective?"

He had me there. I dropped it and looked for George, the doorman. He saw me, waved and came over. "Only got about five minutes," he apologized. "Then we open the doors and the rush starts." He ignored Monks. "You hear about Peggy?"

"Who hasn't?" I said unkindly. "I suppose Box Office business jumped."

He made a face. "Standing room only." He sighed. "Nice kid like Peggy. It makes you wonder what kind of nuts are running around loose."

Monks nodded. "Who's under-

studying her tonight?" George looked at me for explanation. I grinned. "You can talk to him, George. He's only a policeman."

George grinned. "Sorry, Cap." Then he got serious. "Bunny Wing goes on tonight. Great dancer too. Little taller than Peg was. More bumps too."

"Wing?" The name rang a bell. "She Chinese too?"

George put his hands to the corner of his eyes and tugged. "Like Number One Everything. You know how this show is. You need a laundry ticket for a reference."

"Wing," I said again. "Any relation to Jim Wing, the producer of this show?"

"Only his wife," George said maliciously. "You want a better reference than that?" He looked around nervously, checked his watch. "Well, enjoy yourself, Ed. I gotta go to work."

While George was setting up his ticket box for collection of the stubs in the brilliantly lit lobby, Monks eyes me with familiar disapproval in his tiny eyes.

"Producers don't carve up actresses just so their wives can get parts, Mr. Noon. Don't go mucking this case up with fancy motives."

"Who me?" I took his arm. "Come on. Let's go in. I want to see what Bunny Wing has on the ball."

We drifted into the theatre, part of the first surge through the doors. George winked as we went by.

It was a good show. If you like loud music, plenty of half-naked chorines and the Oriental flavor. The customers applauded loudly in spite of the faulty air-conditioning unit that broke down during the first act.

But I had only one eye on the show. The rest of the time I was busy watching the patrons of the first four rows.

Fortunately, Monks and I were on the aisle end of the fifth row. I had a good point to observe from. It was hard to find a lunatic much less a murderer anywhere in the audience of *Dragon Time*.

The first four rows were made up mostly of couples and groups of threes and fours. I immediately dismissed them once I had established their relationship. There were only two loners in the whole crowd. A lovely dame past forty, fashionably dressed, had the seat just in front of me and she was too noisily appreciative of the show for me to give her much thought.

In the first row was the other loner. A tall, lanky guy who sat all hunched and slumped in his seat. He turned once and I caught his profile. It was the face of a Puritan who might have burned a witch in Salem but I knew I was reaching for appropriate fish. He was just a bony, gloomy looking cuss who never smiled and applauded half-heartily the antics of the flashy performers onstage.

Monks was looking too. But pretty soon the activity of the play centered his attention to the front. I couldn't exactly blame him. Whatever else it had, *Dragon Time* was overflowing with beautiful Oriental dancers.

The first act curtain fell to a thunder of clapping hands and the house lights went up. Monks yawned and lumbered to his feet.

"My wife might have enjoyed this," he admitted.

I watched the gloomy looking guy unwind himself from his seat and get to his feet. The clerical collar on the man disturbed me. The killer could be a religious fanatic.

Monks followed my eyes. "No, you don't," he warned. "Don't get any wild notions. We aren't making any pinches on priests."

"Not without proof you mean." I shrugged. "Let's go find George. I got a notion."

Monks sighed and flung himself after me as I moved swiftly up the aisle.

George was having a smoke in the lobby. His face lit up when we approached. "Like the show?"

"Not bad. George, I want to ask you something."

George killed his cigarette. "Shoot."

"Ever see somebody in here more than once? I mean, has *Dragon Time* got a real fan who shows up more than once?"

People were milling all around us now and for one fleeting second I realized how difficult my question was. To a real theatre man, who lives day in, day out with a show, who has time to look at faces?

George looked puzzled. "Naw. Not that I know of. I mean, who looks at customers? They're all

squares who want to see a show because Phil Silvers or Lucille Ball is in it. Nobody comes back twice anymore. It ain't like the old days with stage door Johnnies and all."

"Thanks, George. I just wondered."

"Sure, Ed. See you." He moved out to the box office on some nebulous errand. Monks lit a cigarette of his own.

"I thought of that too." He sighed again. "This is not going to be easy, Ed. After the show, we'll mosey backstage. Maybe the girl's dressing room will tell us something."

"Maybe, Mike. But I'm more interested in the beginning of Act Two."

"Yeah," he admitted. "I want to see this dance too. It must have been a lulu for someone to kill a girl because of it."

The Intermission buzzer sounded warningly and we moved back to our seats.

Bunny Wing's opening act number was burlesque. Sheer burlesque. Under the sanctity of a Broadway show, the producers of *Dragon Time* had slipped one over on the authorities. The dance was as close as the law allows. Maybe it was book, maybe it was plot, but it was the warmest thing since Minsky's I'd ever seen on a legitimate stage.

Bunny Wing was about five feet seven with long black hair and a long white body that sprouted rather than extended from the high heels she was wearing. The high heels and two fans were all she was wearing. And the fans, long gossamer things of silken texture, never stayed on one portion of her anatomy for longer than two seconds. A breathless hush fell over the audience. A hushful quietude counter-pointed by the velvety brush of a bass fiddle and a snare drum. It was sexy, laughable and outrageously vicarious.

What was even better, Miss Wing knew how to dance. Her extension was fluid and marvelous. Peggy Potter might have been just as effective in the number but I doubted it. The physical equipment which Bunny Wing lent to her steps were as much a part of the routine as Lerner to Lowe.

For a full seven minutes, she was all by herself on the stage. The audience was rapt. I kept my eyes on the gloomy looking clergyman. He was still wrapped up disapprovingly in his front seat.

The number ended with a thump of the fiddle and a boom of the hidden drum. In a word, the audience went nuts. The number was a show stopper. The clergyman did not applaud. He was beginning to interest me greatly.

Bunny Wing exited into the wings on the heels of echoing acclaim. *Dragon Time* tore on toward its brassy, bouncing conclusion.

When the house lights went up a full forty minutes later, I was weary. Monks and I hadn't made any headway. A thin little woman in a grey tailored suit had come across the aisle to meet the clergyman as he rose from his seat.

"Thomas," she said in a mild voice. "Did you like it? I thought it rather fun."

"A bit gaudy, Ellen," he sighed. "Shame about our seats being split. Oh, well, they were good seats. Still—"

I ignored the rest of it. Monks was leering triumphantly at my elbow.

"Edward," he mocked. "Will you join me backstage? Miss Wing is waiting to see us."

I went willingly now that I knew what Thomas the clergyman was so gloomy about.

IV

BUNNY WING'S dressing room had a star on the door. I frowned at that. A featured dancer is not a star. But the backstage Gestapo motioned us in. Monks knocked in a loud authoritative pound.

There was no answer so we pushed in.

No wonder policemen aren't very popular. Bunny Wing pushed herself out of a close embrace with a tall, solidly built man in evening dress and pouted.

We didn't really see the pout. Bunny Wing still had her stage costume on. We could see what the fans had hidden. A G-string and a bra no bigger than a man's handkerchief.

"Why the hell don't you wait?" she roared in a nasty voice which possibly explained why she didn't act for a living. "This is a private dressing room."

"See here," the man blustered, defeated by two inches of lipstick on his silly mouth. "This is pretty high-handed!"

"Sorry," Monks growled without mercy. "Police business."

"Oh," the man said weakly and sat down in front of the dressing mirror.

Bunny Wing hid herself behind a screen. "Police? Jim must be crazy." Her eyes flew to her kissing partner. "Larry, what is this?"

Larry's handsome face reflected in the mirror was as blank and uncomprehending as an immigrant's must have been in 1912.

"Look, lady," Monks said easily. "Your husband didn't send us and I don't care who you hold hands with. But this dressing room was the recent home of Peggy Potter. Or is that too long ago for you to remember?"

"Peggy—" mumbled Larry. "Of course."

Monks moved into the room. I closed the door behind us. Bunny Wing turned on the charm over the top of the dressing screen.

"That was terrible, wasn't it? Oh this is Larry Hall. He's Publi-

city man for the show." Her eyes widened coquettishly. "You think Peggy was killed by someone in the show?"

I smiled at her torrent of New Yorkese accented English. She too was about as Oriental as a Brooklyn secretary.

"It's possible," Monks murmured. "Look here, Miss Wing. Did you get any threatening letters today?"

"Threatening letters? Whatever are you talking about? Who'd send me letters like that?"

Monks explained to her what he meant in plain English. Bunny Wing and Larry exchanged glances. I watched them. It was obvious that Peggy Potter had kept her troubles to herself.

Monks sighed. "Would you mind looking around the room please to see if everything is in order?"

Bunny bristled as she dressed herself behind the screen. "Look here, Inspector or Chief or whatever—"

"Captain," Monks said. "Just Captain."

"Captain then. This is my room and—"

Bunny Wing screamed. She must have been the emotional type. Far more emotional than her sexy dance would have led an observer to believe. She and the screen came crashing down to the floor before we could stop her. She had fainted dead away. It didn't take too long to find out why. Pinned to the inside of the screen was another grisly little love letter from the mysterious killer:

She who dances dirty is an insult to the cleanliness of Free China. Desist or you will follow the terrible path of Peggy Potter.

Mr. Theda

WEDNESDAY DIDN'T bring much in the way of clarification. Monks was nowhere nearer to a solution than Khruschev is to Kennedy. I wasn't much help either. After we had revived Bunny Wing and parked Larry Hall in a quiet corner where he wouldn't be in the way, we investigated.

Like I said it looked like an inside job. Nobody can just come and go backstage at New York theatres. Anybody who could tack letters around whenever and wherever he pleased had to be an insider.

Monks put the large cast and the officials through a real grilling but he didn't come up with anything. As Peggy Potter had told me, she had kept pretty much to herself.

So on Wednesday we went to see Jim Wing, the producer of *Dragon Time* in his offices in the Brill Building. He had a large suite on the tenth floor. That and an office full of beautiful aspirants for jobs.

Monks and I weren't auditioning, so we got right in. Being with a policeman had its merits.

Wing was a small, round man. I could see he had about twenty years on his wife Bunny. Monks got right down to the case.

"Any ideas at all, Mr. Wing? It is your show?"

He spread his hands. He had two rings on each one. I watched his face. His smile was bland and his eyes were proud.

"I am at a loss, Captain. Maniacs are not in my province."

Monks nodded. "Then you feel it is some crazy guy running loose?"

"What else? Does a sane man write notes and then do exactly what he says?"

Monks looked at me. Wing had just agreed with my definition of the letters. Wing saw the look. His smile vanished.

"You are familiar with Chinese history? Especially that of recent years. Red China. Patriots, zealots. Die-hards. Possibly some old world Chinaman who is outraged by what he feels is a lowering of the beauty of the Chinese female in *Dragon Time,* is driven to these insane measures to justify his murder of Peggy Potter."

Monks got to his feet heavily. "If that's so, your wife Bunny is on the spot. It could be very serious for her."

Jim Wing stiffened. "You'll protect her, of course. I can't close the show. It would ruin me. The backers aren't paid off yet."

"Of course," Monks said. "We'll throw a guard around her. But we're not magicians."

Wing nodded happily. "You will catch him. Maniacs trip themselves up. He must be caught."

"Mr. Wing," I interrupted, "why didn't your wife get the dancing job in the first place?"

James Wing raised his eyes to me proudly. "Peggy Potter was the better dancer. She was a poem. Bunny is fine. But I didn't feel I should play favorites."

"Good for you," I said.

James Wing folded his hands into a praying clasp and watched us leave.

Going down in the elevator, Monks grunted unhappily. "What do you think, Ed?"

I lit a Camel, ignoring the NO SMOKING sign.

"I was just thinking how fast a killer is going to have to move."

"Meaning?"

"I think," I said, "that Bunny Wing's life is up for grabs tonight!"

"Tonight?"

"It has to be, Mike." I puffed on the Camel. "Otherwise, the killer might never have another chance."

Monks snorted but I think he knew exactly what I meant. He hadn't spent thirty years with the Police Department because he was a dope. I'd never thought he was, and I didn't think so now. He was the kind of officer no crook could make a sap out of.

V

BUNNY WING'S apartment was dark when Monks and I let ourselves in that night. By all counts, Bunny Wing was downtown going through the motions before the evening crowd. We had timed it pretty good. We entered her home just about the time the curtain was falling.

James Wing had called to say he was going to Chicago to sign a contract for a play he was opening in the Fall. Bunny Wing was well protected at the theatre. A policeman would escort her home. If she came straight from the show, she should make it in about twenty minutes.

Monks didn't turn a light on. "Ed," he whispered. "I'll stay out on the patio. You stay in here. We'll see what breaks."

We parted company. I prowled into the bedroom and parked myself behind a long drape that closed off the window that faced Riverside Drive. The stream of headlights going up the Drive kept me company while I whiled away the time. Out on the patio, a wide balcony jutting over the space of seven floors to the street, I could see Monks keeping watch.

We both waited. Time didn't crawl, it limped. I held my breath.

I don't know how much later it was that I could hear the front door open. A key made rattling noises. Then light spilled into the bedroom as the living room lights went on. I heard high heels click across the polished floor. Then the sounds vanished as the heels met the rugs spread around the place. It sounded like Bunny Wing was home.

Then I heard something else.

Bunny Wing shrieked in a low voice. "What are you doing here! I thought—"

A man's low voice answered her softly. I heard Bunny Wing exclaim, "Fine thing! Spying on me! You ought to be ashamed."

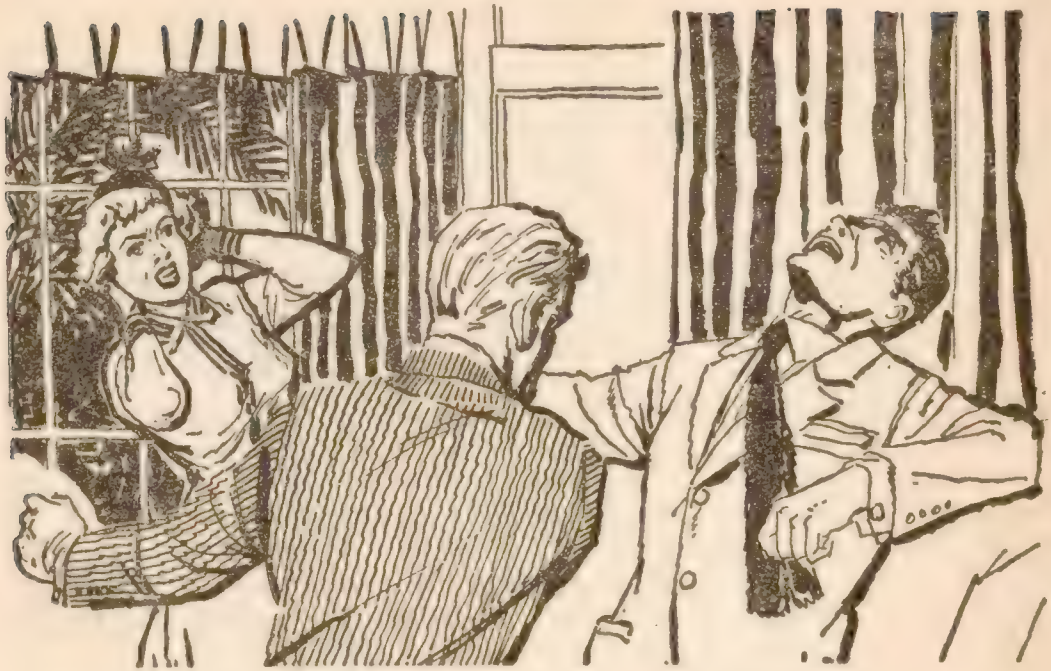
I got away from the drape fast. For a second, I thought Monks had been discovered somehow. I edged up to the doorway. The voices rose. Bunny Wing's and the man's.

"My dear," the man's voice was plain now. "I've waited for this a long time!"

I galvanized. Bunny Wing's high heels clicked desperately toward the front door.

I jumped into the living room. A second sooner and it would have been all over. There wasn't even time to talk. My .45 was in my hand and only needed pointing and fingering. I triggered off before the downward plunging knife found a soft home in Bunny Wing's frightened heart. It was a good shot.

The slug caught Jim Wing's small arm just below the elbow and sent the knife flying across the polished floor. He turned a savage, snarling face at me. A face no



longer bland. Defying everything and maddened with pain, he rushed me.

I reversed the .45 in my hand, feeling absolutely no pity because of Peggy Potter and swiped him across the forehead with it. He went down without a murmur, the blood from his smashed forearm staining an expensive rug.

Bunny Wing could only stare down at him. "Jim?" she faltered. Her eyes rose to meet mine. "Jim did this?"

"Jim did." I bit it out and raced for the patio door, not knowing what to find.

I found Monks slumped to his knees, holding his head and groaning awake. I helped him to his feet. A metal ladder to the rear of the patio rose rigidly to the rooftop. Jim Wing would have gotten away as neatly as he had entered. Across the rooftops.

"Mike, you okay?"

"Dammit, I'll live!" he snapped. "He got me from behind! An old dog like me better learn some new tricks."

I shouldered my .45. "Come on inside and let's have a look at that noggin of yours."

Monks shook me off, his tiny eyes squinting in the gloom. "Was it Wing like we figured?"

"Yeah," I said. "Exactly like we figured."

Inside, Bunny Wing had lapsed into hysteria. I had to slap her a few times before she came to her senses. Then I rang downstairs for

the rest of Captain Michael Monks' men.

An hour later, Monks drove me back to the mouse auditorium in his own car. His head had healed but he'd have the bump for at least a week.

"Crazy these husbands," he growled. "Just because your wife is playing footsie with your publicity manager is no reason to kill her. A divorce would have solved everything."

"He was a smart man. And proud. Kill someone like Peggy first. Make it look like a nut was loose, ready to kill anyone who took over that role. Under cover of that, he was going to kill Bunny for her infidelity. Nobody would ever suspect a husband whose wife was a victim with indirect murdering like that."

Monks shifted gears. "And all the while he was supposed to be in Chicago."

I was thinking about Peggy Potter. Even if she'd gone to the cops the result might have been the same. Somehow that made me feel better. Peggy had been unlucky enough to have the role that Bunny Wing wanted. She was doomed from the start.

Monks let me off in front of my building with a hiss of tires. He blinked at me over the steering wheel.

"Get some sleep, Ed. And thanks for the assist."

I nodded, opened my wallet, and handed over Peggy Potter's crisp C note. Monks made a face. "What's this for?"

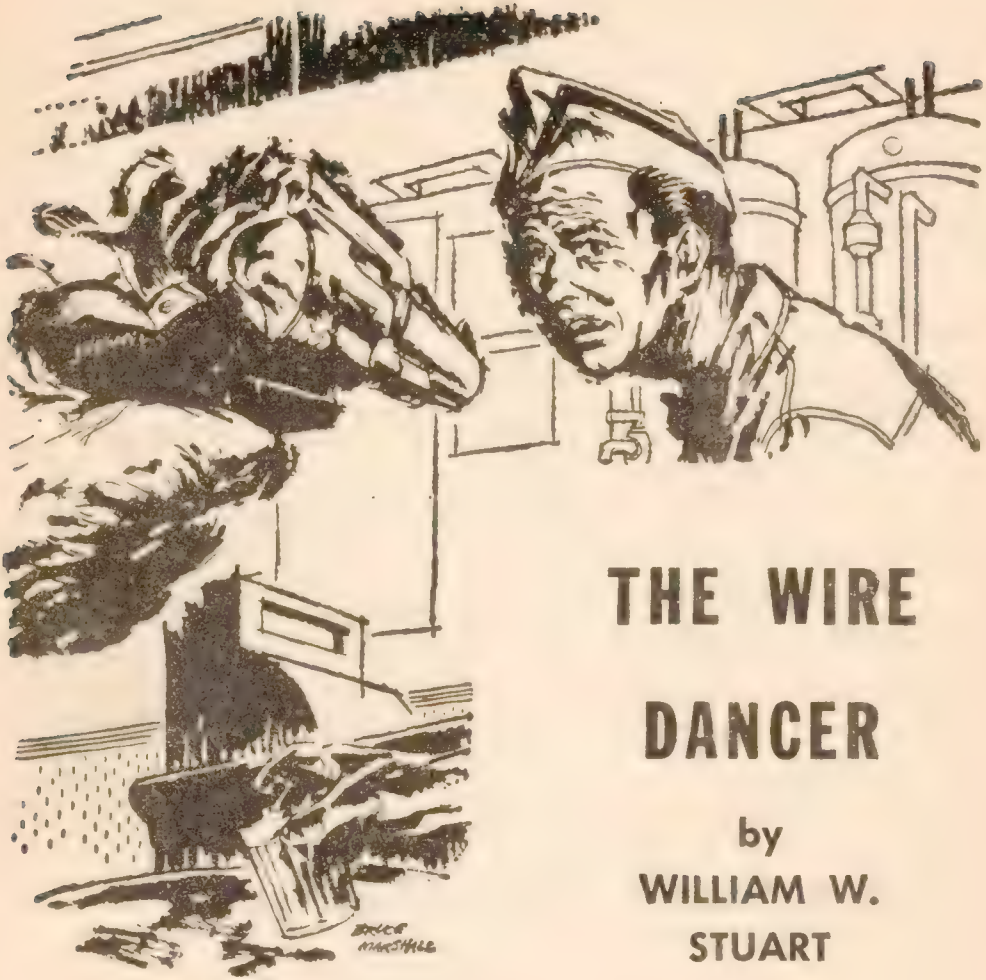
I explained that I wanted him to donate it to the Department's favorite charity, if it had one.

Monks laughed. "Favorite charity? That's us, Ed."

"Fair enough," I said. "It's the reward for catching the killer of the woman who gave it to me."

I watched him drive off, sluicing the car expertly around the bend of Ninth Avenue. He was a good cop. He would always be a good cop.

I went upstairs trying not to think about Peggy Potter and how she had died.



THE WIRE DANCER

by
WILLIAM W.
STUART

An exciting story of an ex-con's restless gun.

THE MAN—himself and a man now, not just a dirty prison number—walked through the gate from the train into the station and looked around. He looked either old for a man as young as he still was in years, or young for a man so old. It would have been hard to say which. But short of a close look, he was ordinary enough. Not tall, not short. Hungry green eyes; a little thin, very pale, keyed up. He smiled a small, tense smile at the echoing station cavern with its scattering of harried, hurrying people and he loved it. Can you love a crummy railroad station?

Sure, why not? "Enoch, you

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happy ill-begotten son," he told himself, "it sure looks good." It did. He was out of stir, free, alive. He had appetites, hungers and he could feed them. He hadn't felt this good since that last R&R to Japan during the Korean cook-out, way back before he took his fall.

Here, on the edge of the shadow of the last five black, endless years, everything, even a lousy railroad station, looked good. Was good. No bars now between him and life, no grey lines of men, no steel doors clanging death's own boredom. No more shaking, sweating nights in the hole, with only a half-loaf of stale bread and rats for company.

Now at last he was out. "Five years," the judge had said. Five years he had done. No parole, no time off for good behavior—five years to the last miserable minute, an aching third of it in the hole. An ordinary man would have been broken, shattered. Not Enoch. He was a case history and professional convention paper to the prison head-shrinker. To himself he had been a five year agony.

But here, now, in the station, back in the city, everything about him added up to a peak of delight. It was wonderful. As he looked around, his narrowed, green eyes glittered greedily. He took a deep, full breath and suddenly he was wolf-hungry. Right at the moment he must have food. But afterwards, when he had eaten, some hot-pants little blonde. He was wolf-hungry for more than food. But anticipation was part of the joy he felt. He could be patient, very patient for an hour—or two, if it came to that.

Across the station at a table opposite the lunch-room counter he ordered a pair of hamburgers. He could eat as he pleased now, throw the hamburgers on the floor if he felt like it. A liftime of hamburgers loomed as a minor privilege, which he could embrace or ignore.

He grinned a thin, hungry grin in a flood of good humor and patted the broad behind of the stout, not-so-young blonde waitress who brought his order. She was a cow. But oh man, she was a nice cow. That smooth-textured, soft curving resilience—so what if it *was* a yard and a half across. It was good, solid stuff, huh? Something a man could really get a grip on.

"Look, Mac, that's not part of your order," mooed the cow. But she didn't appear to be really offended as she waited to see if he could care to order something else. Enoch leaned back, smiled thinly and pulled a roll of bills from his pocket. Peeling one off, he handed it to to the waitress to ruminate over.

"Stick around," he told her. "I might feel like a little dessert, later on."

He picked up one of the hamburgers and bit hungrily into it. Nothing in the world had ever tasted quite so good. And dessert after— Oh yes, the cow. She would be even better. This was life and he was really tasting it, living it, out of that black prison shadow now. And it would be like this from now on.

Everything was his to be savoured. He was free. He even had money, thanks to that sour, old ugly son, Uncle Fred. Out of sight, and in the will! That combination had sure worked for him when the old fool had surprised himself by not living forever. Not that Uncle Fred had ever cared a damn for his brother's brat Enoch. He just hated his other relatives more because he saw them now and then. So he was dead from a slippery bathtub. But his money, that full, fat two hundred grand—that was alive.

Enoch disposed of a small spray of bun and hamburger. The old miser's money couldn't buy him life—but what a luscious, juicy hunk of life it was going to buy for his nephew.

He finished the second hamburger, and waved a hand at the beautiful fat blonde cow. Now it was time for dessert. Man—what a flavor there was in all of it, in every little scattered crumb of life now.

Life, and time passing swiftly. Three weeks, four.

ENOCH WOKE LATE, an ugly taste in his mouth, in the light of a glaring afternoon sun driving in his apartment window. The woman in the big bed beside him was curled up facing away from him, her silky ash-blonde hair spread out on the pillow. Enoch raised one foot high, just to the small of her back above the soft-curved buttocks and shoved, hard. The woman sprawled ungracefully on the floor beside the bed.

He snorted in bored contempt. "Wouldn't kick *that* out of bed," was what he'd said to himself the first time he'd seen the sexy-smooth broad singing in the night club. So now he had kicked her out of bed. Why? She was a cow, stupid, tiresome, unexciting. They were dull cows, all of them. The same damned thing—a drag.

The girl was wide awake now, on her feet, furious. Her bosom was heaving, and her mouth was a distorted oval, bellowing at him. Enoch raised himself on one elbow. The covers fell away from the scattering of coarse, black hairs on his wire-muscled chest. His green eyes smouldered on a brink of flaming rage. He said, "Get out."

"You—"

"Out!"

The blonde looked down at him a moment and shivered. Then she turned to run nakedly, woman-awkwardly, to the bathroom. In a moment she was out again,

her clothes thrown on in haste. Without looking again at Enoch, she hurred across the bedroom and on out of the apartment.

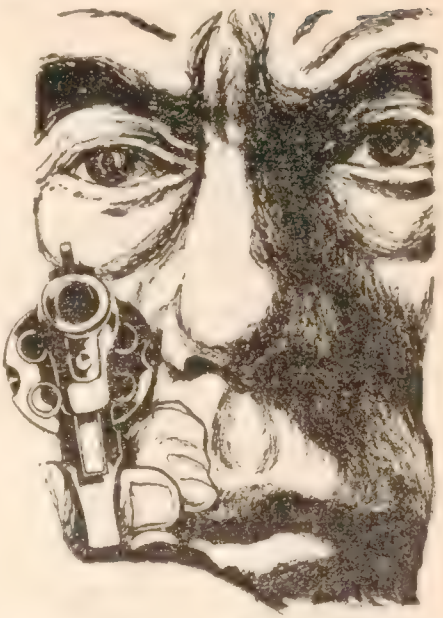
Enoch heard the door close carefully. She was afraid. She knew better than to slam it. She knew, damn the dull cow. Damn them all. Enoch lay on the bed with the bitter taste of bile on his tongue.

Now, already, it was no good. He had the money, women, booze —and a damned nice expensive apartment. He was still young, and his health was all right. He sat up in the bed on the soft, silken sheets and looked around the room with total distaste. It was no good, miserable—a cell. Why? No flavor any more to any of it. No hunger. The finest meal ever prepared is nothing without appetite.

Even to Enoch it made no sense. It was a stupid situation. But the lack of freshness, of novelty and excitement, stripped it of all pleasure for him.

A month before he had loved everything. Then day by day, unbelievably, the prison years of tortured longing had receded into distance. The black shadow had faded. The pleasure in everything else had faded along with it. No meal had been as good as the first hamburger. No woman had the savor of that faded, fat blonde from the railroad station restaurant.

He took a deep breath and



sighed, a sigh that ended in a snarl. Even the damned air was a stuffy, smothering blanket of boredom. In flat sunlight his featureless plain of pleasure was a desert. Suddenly, in an energetic burst of irritation Enoch threw the covers aside and got out of the bed.

ENOCH, IN ONE of his new suits —a badly wrinkled blue serge— shirt and no tie, slouched into the desolate railroad-station lunchroom at three in the morning. The place was empty except for a graveyard-shift counterman, and an old drifter dozing over a cup of coffee at the far end of the counter.

"Hey Mac."

The counterman turned from tiredly scraping the grill.

"Where's the waitress, Mac? The big, fat blonde cow?"

"Off. Anythin' else you want to know?"

"I thought she was on nights this week."

"Off at two-thirty. What else, Mac?"

"Gimme a hamburger and a cup of coffee. Who's he?" Enoch jerked a thumb at the old man drooping over his cold coffee.

"He's a bum," the counterman said. "You got objections?"

Enoch shivered faintly with the effort of restraint. But he shrugged and managed to mutter without heat, "Nope. Hamburger."

The counterman put the hamburger on the grill and moved to draw the coffee. Then, with a troubled frown, he stepped on down to shake the old man roughly by the shoulder. "C'mon, Snifty. Move it. No flop house in here. Get on out and wait for a train."

The bum stumbled half-awake to his feet and shuffled off, mumbling to himself. The counterman drew a coffee, turned the hamburger and put a half bun on top. He set the coffee on the counter. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"Don't burn up that hamburger, Mac. I don't like them overdone."

The counterman turned with a snort. He took the hamburger off the grill, and added a leaf of overtired lettuce. "Onion?" he asked.

"No onion."

The counterman swung around to put the hamburger on the counter. Then he stood there, steady-on, staring at the gun Enoch held pointed right at the center of his chest.

"Stick-up," said Enoch tonelessly. "Clean that register."

The counterman paled visibly. "Yeah, sure, sure friend. Be glad to. Real glad to, I mean. Me, I only work here. It ain't my bread."

"Stow the chatter, and get it."

The counterman got it, a fistful of bills. He started scooping up the silver.

"Never mind that. The green will do."

It wasn't much of a stack—over a hundred but less than two. Without counting or even looking, Enoch stuffed the money in a side pocket. Then he raised his bright green eyes and stared steadily at the counterman. "Think you'll remember what I look like?"

"Huh? Oh no, sir, I—" The counterman was white, stammering. "No sir, I wouldn't remember—"

"Right. You won't."

Enoch squeezed the trigger once . . . twice. The shots roared and echoed in the empty restaurant. Enoch moved from the counter. Inside the station, a dozen sleepy eyes turned in reluctant alarm toward the sound. In the other direction the street was deserted.

Enoch took a step toward the street door. Then he turned back

for a moment to pick up his hamburger from the counter. He felt wolf-hungry. He walked across the dirty, tiled floor and out the street door, taking a big bite of hamburger as he went.

A trickle of juice ran down from the corner of his mouth. It was a delicious hamburger. Delicious. Outside, he crossed the empty, pre-dawn street in the middle of the block, at a lazy lope, grinning and chewing, and trying to decide which of his luscious, lovely cows to take. For some reason the fat first one from the restaurant got the nod.

"SAME KIND OF job," said the police sergeant, leaning back against the frosted glass station office door, "What do you think, Lieutenant? Some of them punk kids, huh?"

"Well, no, Potosky, that's not what I think," said Lieutenant McKinley. "Me, I think he's a loner. I think he's some kind of nut."

"Yeah? You sure, Lieutenant?"

"I haven't been sure of anything since the time I saw Santa Claus slip his pillow when I was four. But to me, it looks like a nut. Check me out. A killing every time."

"Panic?"

"Three times now. The counterman at the station restaurant, the cashier at the Palace theater, and the old man and his wife in the liquor store. No sign of resistance. Each person shot twice. Those are busy areas, Potosky. A gun makes noise. Why not just slug them?"

Potosky shrugged. "Identification?"

"He's afraid of identification and still makes all that racket to attract attention? Well—maybe. But then there's the silver."

"Plenty of guns won't bother with silver in a stick up."

"Potosky, a man who's knocking over ten grand lets the silver go. But if the job is only good for maybe a C or so—does he pass up thirty, forty dollars in small change? I doubt it. And then there's the timing. Four weeks between jobs. Why? The time of day."

"Different each time, Lieutenant. That should prove something?"

"It proves nothing. But—each job earlier in the day than the one before. More people likely to be around. Bigger risk."

"So he's stupid."

"He's shortening his odds each time, at any rate. Which means he's either stupid or a nut."

Potosky shrugged.

"All right, McKinley said. "I don't know either. But in four weeks, four weeks from yesterday, I'm going to turn out every man on the force I can get my hands on—starting in the afternoon."

Four weeks less a day.

Enoch was slumped in a chair by the window in his apartment, gnawing on a sour distaste. Everything had gone flat again. He had been almost certain that this time it wouldn't. If there had been a breath of suspicion—but it was hopeless. Not a cop in this town could have found his butt with both hands in solitary. Not one had even looked cross-eyed at him. To call them dull-witted would have been plain stupid. It was a higher compliment than they deserved.

"Enoch? Doll-boy?" That was the cow, his newest, number one cow, a red-haired Hereford type. She mooed in from the bedroom. Now what? "You know Enoch, Sweetie-boy, I been thinking."

"Give it up. You aren't built for it."

"Now Sweetie. I been thinking, the reason you keep getting in those awful moods of yours is because you don't have enough to do. You ought to keep busy. What you need is a hobby, hon."

"You stupid tramp!" He dragged himself up out of the chair. The girl backed away from him, eyes wide, frightened. He back-handed her across the face once just to be sure he had her attention. "You know something, cow? I got a hobby."

He had a hobby—and, by God, it was time to get to work on it right now. The gun he kept in a plastic bag in the tank of the toilet. He went into the bathroom.

Complete in the Next Issue

THE DEATH GIMMICK

A Novelet of Violence and Death in the West Indies

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

In the minds of most killers, buried deep, you'll find faint stirrings of conscience . . . remorse and guilt not completely extinguished. But this man was different. An off-beat shocker.

It was just before three in the afternoon when he pushed in from the railroad station waiting-room to the restaurant. Hell with chasing around all over the goddamn town. This slop heap was handy. It would do. Mid-afternoon—it was slow, sleepy. There was a thin scattering of people, though, at tables and booths.

There was a short, stupid-looking counterman—a new one, of course—and a waitress on duty. Damned if it wasn't the same one, too, the old cow, the fat first cow. He licked thin-smiling lips, looking at her. Should he—?

She recognized him. "Oh Mr. Enoch." The old hunk of beef could actually blush, "What could I get you?"

"Get on back of the counter there," he rapped. "Get me a piece of pie." Her? It would have to be her now. No hurry though. Let her watch. Then he could take her up to her apartment afterwards. They'd both get a bang out of that; and then she'd get one last bang and that would be it.

He followed her over to the counter. The half dozen or so drowsy, slack-time customers in the place weren't worth more than a glance. They would be frozen, too stupefied to even get to their feet. He could count on that.

"What kind of pie do you—" The fat blonde broke it off, her brown eyes open wide in dull astonishment.

Enoch rested his gun on the counter. "Stick-up," he said softly as the counterman froze, his slack jaw hanging open. Enoch shifted his gun to his left hand and fished a cigarette out of his pocket. What cattle they were! So barely conscious in the first place that killing them would be only the smallest change, hardly enough of a thing to stir the blood or lift a pulse beat.

For a moment, as the pale, sick-looking counterman started to clean the register, Enoch wondered if he would have the energy or interest to pull the trigger.

"All right now—easy does it. No sudden moves. Just lay that gun down gentle like, on the counter. Then lift your hands up and turned around slow. Real slow."

That was the police lieutenant—Sam McKinley. He had men in uniform and out of uniform, nearly double strength all through the downtown section. "The fact is," he had told Potosky, "lightning ofter strikes the same place twice." On that hunch he had staked himself in the station restaurant.

"Put the gun down now," McKinley said, evenly.

Enoch let the gun slip from his left hand. It clattered faintly on the counter. He started to raise his hands, turning slowly to his left. Half-way around he snatched up the gun with his right hand and, and whirling, fired. So did the

lieutenant, once, and slumped to the soiled tile floor, clutching his right shoulder as his gun slipped from his hand.

Enoch banged back against the counter, straightened, grinned. That did it. "C'mon, cow," he said, nodding his head at the blonde. Then he turned, gun dangling loosely in his right hand, and started toward the street door. Half-way there he staggered and almost went down. But he managed to lurch forward and plunge through the swinging door onto the street.

Sheer momentum carried him across the sidewalk, but the curb was a precipice. He couldn't stop. He pitched over it, down, down. He hit the pavement on his side. The gun slipped from his fingers, and his body jerked spasmodically. He rolled over on his back.

He lay on the pavement in the sun, and the pavement was warm and pleasant to his back as the dark blood oozed from his chest. Even the blood, soaking through his shirt, spreading across his stomach, warmed and comforted him. His green eyes, hungry, open wide, fed greedily on the yellow rays whirling dust motes danced and shimmered in the air above the city street.

What pleasure, what beauty there was in everything. It was good—so good to be alive. He took a deep breath. The air in his lungs was sweet, filled with a million tiny molecules of odor, traces of the good things of earth and the rich, raw smells of the city.

Then, in a whistling sigh, the breath went out of him. The greed, the fear of hunger and the hunger of fear faded from the green eyes. They turned cold and glassy and he was dead.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

Caples had no way of knowing his wife would kill herself. So it called for great skill in the alibi-framing department.

There Ain't No Santa Claus

by

RICHARD HARDWICK

DELLA WENT OVER the parapet as easily as if she'd simply been stepping into the next room. Except that the balcony was seventeen stories straight up from the street.

Caples stood staring at the empty space where his wife had just been standing. He'd even laughed when she had threatened to jump.

It had all started when Della had taken the small revolver from her handbag and pointed it at Caples' chest.

"Don't try to talk me out of it, Edmond! I'm going to kill you just as surely as you've killed me!"

© 1961, by Richard Hardwick

"You're drunk again, Della," he said. He pulled a gold case from the inside pocket of his dinner jacket and lighted a cigarette. He took a long drag and his eyes smiled at her, not with humor but with disdain. "Give me that thing before somebody gets hurt."

"Don't come near me!" She held the pistol in both hands. "You've ruined everything you've ever touched! If anyone ever deserved to die, Edmond, it's you! You've made a wreck of me. *Look* at me!"

"That's right, look at you," he said, flicking an ash from his cigarette. "A lush, Della, that's all you are. A lousy self-pitying drunk."

"And you did it to me!"

"Me?" He laughed and moved toward her. "Here, give me that damned thing before it goes off."

"*I'll shoot . . .*"

Caples laughed again and reached out with one hand and took the gun from her. He tossed it onto the sofa. "Get yourself a drink, Della. I imagine that worked up quite a thirst."

"I haven't had a drink all day," she said.

"You deserve one now. That was a beautiful little scene. A bit melodramatic but well done."

Della went to the small bar and shakily poured Scotch into a glass. She dropped in ice cubes and quickly lifted the glass to her mouth with both hands. Over the top of the glass she watched her husband for an instant with narrowed eyes. Then her eyes went past him to the door of the balcony. She took a long drink, lowered the glass, and walked stiffly to the sliding glass door. She drew it back and stepped out into the cold December night.

"Then I'll have to do it the other way," she said, as though talking to herself. The snow had stopped, and the sky was clear and filled with stars.

"Come back in and get ready, Della," her husband called. "We have to be at the Dunbar's in an hour."

"You'll have to make my apologies. I'm going to kill myself."

She turned and looked at him steadily, her lips tightening.

He shrugged. "Jump, or go get dressed."

She began to cry. "You don't care what happens to me! You just care about yourself!"

Suddenly she drew back her half-finished drink and flung it in his face.

Caples' eyes blazed. "*You damned neurotic*—" He took three quick steps toward her and slapped her, hard, with the back of his hand. His fury unassuaged, he gave her a second, even more violent blow on the jaw.

She spun backward, the small of her back struck against the masonry rail and over she went.

For a moment he stood staring and then he ran to the parapet

and looked over. In the darkness, along the sheer side of the building, he saw nothing, and then seventeen floors below he could just make out her sprawled form on the lighted sidewalk not five yards from the doorman.

He saw the man move quickly toward her.

"*My God . . .*"

EDMOND CAPLES had not reached his position of wealth and power by reacting stupidly or self-destructively to unexpected situations. He realized, even as he saw Della's body strike the pavement far below, that what she said was true. He would be accused of murdering her. His temper was a legendary thing, and Della had quite obviously given some sober and intense thought to what she had done.

It had been no spur-of-the-moment impulse which had prompted her to take her own life. She had seemed to know that she would not be able to use the gun, and had kept that grim alternative in reserve.

His first move, then, would be to get out of the apartment, and he would have to accomplish it without being seen. Secondly, he would have to have a witness.

He glanced quickly at his watch. Seven o'clock. The witness, whoever he might be, would have to swear that Caples was nowhere near the penthouse at that hour of the evening. It was sketchy, hastily improvised, but it would have to do. He would have to establish a reasonable doubt, and with that and some high-priced legal talent he would come out of this with his skin. And Della could rot in hell.

He descended to the deserted apartment house foyer on the self-service elevator, and made his way without being seen to his car, which was parked halfway down the block. So far so good. Luck had always been on his side, and he felt sure that it wouldn't desert him now.

He drove away, avoiding the street in front of the apartment building where a siren was now moaning low, and a crowd of last-minute shoppers stood in a silent circle, looking on the tableau of death.

He drove across town toward his office, his mind busily coming up with name after name and discarding each in turn. He knew that this was exactly the sort of thing they were waiting for—something that could strike Edmond Caples down, and none of them would lift a finger to help him so long as they thought he would not rise up again and take his vengeance.

He stopped the car on West Broad and went into a crowded bar and ordered a drink. There had to be someone who would vouch for him, someone who could be bought or intimidated.

He thought of the busy bartender, but realized that any testimony the man might give would not seem plausible. How could he remember one face in the hundreds he would see before the night was over, particularly the face of a stranger.

Caples finished his drink and went out onto the sidewalk. Across the street from the bar a sign on the front of a bank alternately gave the time and the temperature. 26° . . . 7:44 . . . 26° . . . 7:45 . . .

"Merry Christmas, sir. Won't you give something for those less fortunate than yourself?"

He turned and saw a white-whiskered Santa Claus standing before a tripod that held a black kettle. A brass bell was in the man's hand and he was tolling it slowly, a weary stoop to his shoulders.

Caples turned away in disgust. *Beggars . . .*

Then he turned back. The man was smiling, ringing the bell.

"Just a little will help, sir. There's so much to be done."

Caples reached inside his coat and took out his wallet. He extracted two ones and dropped them into the kettle.

"Not much of a job, is it?" he said.

"Sir?"

"You. This job you've got. It's not much, is it."

"Oh, it's not so bad," the man shrugged. "Once you get used to it."

Caples looked at him appraisingly. A bum, a down-and-outer. But at least he had no bone to pick with Edmond Caples. And with him money would have a large and persuasive voice.

"Look, my friend. How'd you like to make two hundred dollars?"

"Two hundred—" The old man stopped ringing the bell. Then a smile came to his face and he slowly began tolling the bell again. "You're making a joke."

"No, it's no joke." Caples opened the billfold again and took out a pair of hundred dollar bills. "And this won't be all. There'll be two hundred more in it if you do as I say."

"And what might that be?"

Caples pointed across the street. "See that sign on the bank? What time does it say?"

The old man squinted. "It says . . . seven-fifty."

Caples shook his head. "No, old man. It says seven o'clock. Exactly seven o'clock."

"But . . ."

Caples held out the two bills and waved them slowly back and forth under the old man's nose. "For four hundred bucks it says seven o'clock. When did you ever see that kind of dough?"

The old man looked at the money, reached out to take it, then draw back his hand.

"Go on," said Caples. "Take it. Take the money."

The hand came out again and the fingers closed on the two bills.

"Now take a good look at me," Caples said. "Take a real good look, so you'll know me the next time you see me."

The old man looked long and carefully, then he nodded his head and the smile came back. "I won't forget you."

"You'd better not," Caples said. He stepped close to the old man and his eyes narrowed. "If you value your life, you'd better not."

A MAN WAS standing just inside the door when Caples entered the penthouse. Just behind the man stood the apartment manager, a harried look on his thin face.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" said Caples, spinning his hat to a chair.

The stranger drew out a billfold and showed a badge. "I'm Lieutenant Luigi Rocco, Mr. Caples. It's about your wife, sir. She's dead."

"Della . . ?"

The lieutenant nodded. "She went off the balcony a little over an hour ago, at seven o'clock according to the doorman."

Caples managed to look shaken. "Oh, God! I was afraid of that!'

"Were you, Mr. Caples? I understand you and your wife quarreled chronically. I also understand that you threatened her."

"And who said that?"

"A Miss Mae Gant who lives on the fifteenth floor. She claims to have been a friend of your wife's."

Caples lighted a cigarette and blew smoke at the lieutenant. "Miss Mae Gant is a liar."

"There's also a Barbara Heath who lives on the twelfth floor. She says substantially the same thing."

"Then substantially she is also a liar."

"Can you tell me where you were at seven o'clock, Mr. Caples?"

"I was finishing some work at my office."

"In your dinner clothes?" Lieutenant Rocco asked.

"I had forgotten something, something important. I went back to the office about six."

"Working on Christmas Eve, huh?"

"It's no different than any other day to me. Now, Lieutenant, suppose we cut out the cat and mouse business. If you're trying to say I pushed my wife off that balcony, and apparently you are, then I think you had better book me, and let me talk to my lawyer."

"Was there anyone else at your office—anyone who could vouch for your being there at seven?"

Caples shook his head. "Wait a minute. I did stop off at a bar on my way home, a place at the corner of West Broad and Spring. When I finished my drink and came out I stood for a while talk-

ing to a Santa Claus who was stationed in front of the place.

"There was a clock on the bank across the street and I recall mentioning to him that it was seven o'clock and I had to be getting home. I put a couple of bucks in his kettle. He'll remember me."

"Kind of a coincidence, you might say," Lieutenant Rocco remarked.

"Think any damned thing you please! That's what happened!"

Rocco closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Then he opened his eyes. "United Charities, that's the name of the outfit with the Santas and the kettles. That shouldn't be hard to check out. Mind if I use your phone?"

"Help yourself, lieutenant," Caples smiled.

A moment later the police officer hung up the telephone. "The shift was just changing. They're keeping the Santa from West Broad and Spring there. Let's go."

In the squad car Caples stared out the window and said, "So this is how the citizenry is treated. It's absurd."

"Murder and suicide are always absurd, Mr. Caples. Our work is merely the result of absurdity."

"The commissioner himself will have some explaining to do about this."

Rocco leaned forward and tapped the officer at the wheel on the shoulder. "Up there on the right, Cramer. Just pull over and wait. This shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes."

Sergeant Cramer eased the police car to the curb and Caples and the lieutenant got out. In his stomach Caples felt the butterflies begin. Suppose the man reneged? He already had the two hundred. Suppose that had been enough to satisfy him? Caples cursed himself for his impulsiveness in giving the man so much money to start with. A bum like that had probably never had a hundred dollar bill in his hand before.

"You're sure about the time you talked to this fellow?" Rocco said.

"We both looked at the time sign, and I said it was seven o'clock. He'll remember."

Rocco nodded.

They went into the building and down a hallway toward a lighted door. Outside the door stood a number of men, talking and smoking. For the most part they were old and shabbily dressed and many of them had the watery eyes of the wino.

They seemed to sense who Rocco was and an uneasy silence settled over them as Caples and the lieutenant passed and entered the room.

It was a harshly-lighted office. At one end of the room stood a desk. At the desk sat a bald-headed man wearing heavy horn-rimmed glasses. He looked up,

then rose, a grim expression on his face.

"Lieutenant Rocco?"

The police officer nodded. "This is Mr. Caples."

The bald man said, "My name's Albert Lewis."

Rocco said, "It's as I told you on the phone. I want an identification from one of your Santas."

"The Broad and Spring man, wasn't it?"

"That's right," said Caples.

Lewis came around from behind the desk and went to the door. "Harney, step in here a minute."

A thin, stooped old man entered, a look of abject terror on his face. He followed Lewis across to the desk.

"Who the hell is this?" said Caples.

"This is the man who was at West Broad and Spring."

Caples shook his head. "No, you're mistaken. This isn't the one."

"Yes sir," said the old man. "I was there tonight. I was there from noon on."

"That's not the one you talked to?" said Rocco.

"Hell no!" snapped Caples.

Rocco looked at the scared old man. "Take a look at Mr. Caples here. Have you ever seen him before?"

The old man stared intently at Caples for a moment. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "No sir. But I swear I was there the whole shift." He turned to his employer. "I swear it, Mr. Lewis!"

"Maybe it was some other corner," Rocco suggested to Caples.

"It was Broad and Spring," Caples said between clenched teeth. "And this bum was not there!"

The old man moved away cringing. "I—I only took off a few minutes for . . . for a cup of coffee at the drugstore," he said piteously. "It was cold today! I was freezing! I thought just a few minutes wouldn't hurt none."

"There was a funny thing about that location tonight," said Lewis. "Something I haven't seen before in all my years of charity work."

"What was that?" said the lieutenant.

"When we opened the kettle a while ago we found two one hundred dollar bills in it. Sometimes you find a five or a ten, but never a hundred."

The old man grinned at Caples and Rocco, showing worn, blackened teeth. "And they say there ain't no Santa Claus . . ."

(Continued from other side)

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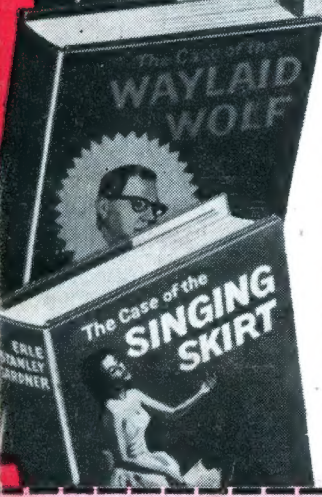

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